

## Bending, Breaking, and Backing Down by HobbitSpaceCase

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** (and also has a praise kink, Billy discovers monsters, Billy enjoys hitting things far too much, Billy is a shithead and will be for a while, Depictions of Abuse, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, M/M, Slow Burn, also from Neil, and eventually how not to be such a dick, both Steve and Billy have trauma, but that'll show up later), domestic abuse, homophobic slurs from Neil, way eventually, with a healthy does of tension throughout

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Lucas Sinclair, Max (Stranger Things), Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers, and probably the rest of the cast too, eventually - Character

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2017-11-02

**Updated:** 2018-04-06

**Packaged:** 2022-04-21 15:35:12

**Rating:** Mature

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

**Chapters:** 9

**Words:** 29,939

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

*Something is up in this weird-ass little town, but that isn't Billy's problem. Billy's problem is getting Max back home so he doesn't get his face beat in yet again.*

Aka, the one where Billy just wants to bring Max home and avoid his dad's wrath, but the universe has other plans. Plans that involve monsters from another dimension, a whole bunch of annoying kids, a little bit of character growth, and one far too pretty Steve Harrington.

# 1. The Number of The Beast

## Author's Note:

Well here it is, the start of my own version of a Billy joins the demon hunting crowd and gets a redemption arc story. I've tried to take some things in my own direction, since there's already a few (great!) fics out there with this premise.

Protective rage filled Steve as he spun Billy around, hitting him across the face with as much force as he could muster. He ducked out of the way of Billy's response, only to come up swinging again, fists stinging as they smashed into Billy's face. Steve relished the pain. No one was going to touch these kids and get away with it, not on his watch.

Billy stumbled back against the counter, and Steve didn't hesitate, charging forward to wrap his arms around Billy's middle in a tackle that sent them both careening sideways, Billy's arms flailing as he scrabbled for purchase on anything that might stop his fall. One hand latched unfortunately onto the fridge and Steve saw, from the corner of his eye as though in slow motion, the fridge door opening under the combined weight of the two boys. A red flower mouth full of razor sharp teeth spilled open and fifty pounds of hastily crammed in monster slid from the fridge as Billy lost his grip and they crashed into the ground.

Steve hit the floor hard, becoming quickly aware of two equally distressing facts. First, Billy Hargrove was definitely hard against Steve's thigh where it had slipped between Billy's legs. Second, there was a dead demodog on top of them.

The second fact was rapidly taking care of the first one, as Billy stared at the creature pinning them both to the floor, blood dripping into his open mouth from his nose. "The *fuck* is that?!" Billy screamed, shoving both Steve and demodog off as he scrambled crab-like across the floor into the wall, looking like he would have very much liked to climb the wall as well to get further away.

"It's a demodog," Dustin said from the other side of the kitchen. Steve paused in extricating himself from the creature to glare at the kid.

Sure enough, Billy's head swung around, a snarl on his lips as he stood up and advanced on the tiny troublemakers, who crowded closer together at his approach. "I don't know what the fuck you're doing, Harrington," Billy said, not looking away from the kids, "but I'm taking my sister and getting out of this freak show."

"Like hell you are," Steve said, lunging across the room to stop him.

Billy turned with unexpected speed, left arm swinging with all the momentum of his body. His fist slammed into Steve's face, and stars exploded in Steve's vision. The floor was surprisingly more comfortable than it had been a minute ago, he noted distantly.

A vicious smile bloomed across Billy's face as he straddled Steve, hitting him again.

And again. And again.

Blackness crept over the edges of Steve's vision and Billy kept swinging, bloodied teeth bared in a snarling grin. Just as Steve was losing the fight with consciousness, a syringe appeared in Billy's neck. His weight slid off Steve's lap, revealing Max standing behind him, cold anger in her eyes as she hefted Steve's bat.

That made twice in one night that Steve was saved by a little girl. Everyone at school was right - Steve *had* become lame. That thought finally chased him into blissful unconsciousness.

oOo

When Billy woke up, the creepy dog monster was still on the floor, but Harrington and the kids were gone. His car was also gone, as he discovered as soon as he could walk straight enough to make it out the door. He was going to kill all of those fucking kids, and then put bars on Max's window.

If his dad didn't kill him first, that was.

Which his dad was definitely going to do if he went home without

Max.

He stumbled back inside, legs still unsteady from whatever Max had stabbed him with, and went hunting till he found a bathroom down one dimly lit hallway. The overhead light flickered when he hit the switch, but stayed on. He made his way over to the sink, and then stared at himself for a minute, breathing deep against the pounding ache in his skull. He was a fucking mess.

Congeaed blood tracked a path from his nose over his mouth and down the column of his throat. His best shirt was ruined, and his perfectly styled hair looked like a rat's nest. Already, a bruise was blooming around his right eye. When he splashed water over his face and scrubbed off the blood, it reopened the cut on his lip and revealed the second bruise darkening on his jaw. He scrubbed harder when water not from the sink prickled at his eyes, and pushed the heels of his palms against his temples till fireworks exploded in his vision and the awful pressure of impending tears lessened.

He wasn't a fucking faggot, and he wasn't gonna cry because his sister drugged him and stole his car.

Unzipping his pants, he pissed in the toilet by the sink, taking perverse pleasure in leaving it for someone else to find as he washed his hands after and scrubbed at his face one last time.

Back in the living room, he finally took in all the crayon drawings papering the walls. This house was nuts. It was also not his problem; as soon as Max was back they were getting the fuck out of here and never talking to any of these people again. He sank down on the ratty old sofa, trying to convince himself things weren't spiraled well out of his control already. Out of the corner of his eye, he could still see the *whatever the fuck it was* splayed out on the kitchen floor.

Kids with syringes full of tranquilizer and bats full of nails, hanging out in houses wallpapered in the crayon drawings of a crazy person and hiding dead monsters in the fridge - this place was way more fucked up than he'd ever imaged for some dinky little town in Indiana. He would almost think he'd just hallucinated the nail bat, fucked up on whatever drugs those were as he was, but the hole in the floor between his legs when he'd woken up said otherwise. At

least he still had his dick.

So - something was up in this weird-ass little town, but that wasn't Billy's problem. Billy's problem was getting Max back home so he didn't get his face beat in yet again. The bruises left by Steve meant his dad wouldn't even have to go easy on him; he had the perfect excuse for a fucked up face if anyone asked questions.

And this was a reason Billy hated being alone with his thoughts and nothing to do.

It was easier to be angry, or to lose himself in thinking about a stupid date with a stupid girl he didn't care about. Easier to drown everything out with loud music and snarky bullshit and rage, than to think about anything too real. A low, rhythmic tapping sound filled the room, and he jumped before realizing it was his own feet, tapping against the floor. He was restless, vibrating with barely contained energy, desperate to *move*, to break something or hurt someone and stop the thoughts that wouldn't fucking quit spiraling like a whirlpool in his head, sucking everything down to blackened depths where he couldn't see anything outside his own fucking -

No. He was not *afraid* of his dad. No one liked getting beat on, sure, but he'd given up fear a long time ago. It never did him any good, just got him yelled at for being a weak little nancy boy.

He definitely wasn't afraid for fucking *Max*, either. It wasn't Billy's fault she had decided to run off with a bunch of other kids and one Steve Harrington, out into who the fuck knew what other weird-ass bullshit existed in this fucking fucked up town.

He didn't even realize he was up and moving till his foot connected with the monster dog on the floor. He kicked it again, a scream tearing out of his throat. "Fuck!" he shouted, bracing his hands against the freezer door and kicking the thing again and again, till its face resembled less a flower full of teeth and more a smear of red and gray slime. He leaned forward, breathing heavily and squeezing his eyes shut against the tears that wanted to fall. Getting the scuffmarks out of his favorite boots was gonna be a bitch and a half later, but right then he couldn't even muster up the energy to care.

It was sheer luck he didn't miss the creak of footsteps on the porch heralding the return of Steve and his wayward sister, along with the rest of the little brats she'd apparently started hanging out with. He wiped roughly at his eyes, planted a smirk on his face, and was lounging against the counter like he didn't have a care in the world by the time everyone filed into the house.

"If any of you fuckers put a mark on my car, you're gonna pay for it," he said, at the same time the little curly haired one burst out, "What did you do to the demodog!"

"What I'm *gonna* do to your face if you hurt my car," he shot back, lip stinging as it pulled up in a sneer.

Steve sighed, stepping in front of the kids and shouldering that fucking bat held in his hands. Definitely not a hallucination, then. Billy ruthlessly crushed the twinge of sympathy he felt when he saw just how much he'd fucked up Steve's pretty face. "Why are you still even here?" Steve asked.

"Because you assholes knocked me out and stole my fucking car!"

"Yeah, because you were trying to kill Steve!" Max piped up, drawing Billy's attention back to her.

"Shut up, Max! You've already caused enough trouble tonight." Billy didn't miss the way the other kids crowded around her behind Steve. Rage flared up in his vision, but he wasn't stupid enough to try attacking the kids again, not with Steve still holding the bat like he was two seconds away from finishing what Max had already threatened. "Get outside and get in the fucking car," he said, smothering the rage with an effort of will. "We're going home."

"No," she said, planting her feet and meeting his eyes. Billy wanted to scream.

"Look, man," Steve said, voice soft in a way that made Billy want to fuck up his face even more, "the kids have had a really crazy day. I'm happy to drive her home later, or tomorrow, if she wants to stay with her friends tonight."

“Yeah,” the other midgets piped up, and christ Billy was too tired for this shit, and probably still a little drugged, because instead of arguing he just threw up his hands in defeat.

“Fine!” he said, stalking past the group and snarling at Steve. “You can bring her home, and *you* can explain to my dad why she was gone all night.” He didn’t give any of them a chance to respond to that, slamming through the door instead and stomping to his car. The little fuckers *had* left a fucking dent in the front, but he would deal with that later.

When Billy finally got home, sans Max (beaten by King Steve and his merry band of well-armed midgets, cause he really was just that pathetic), his dad was furious.

It took a week for the worst of the bruises to fade, and he skipped basketball practice every day till they were yellowed and nearly gone. His life was fucked, but he didn’t need well-meaning bullshit questions about the shape of his ribs on top of everything else.

## 2. Edge of a Knife

*“Please come to DnD on Friday?”*

Steve sighed and looked away from Dustin’s wide, pleading eyes. The kid had been badgering him to join his friends’ DnD group ever since the two bonded over monster hunting and beating up Billy Hargrove. Now he was looking up at Steve with his big brown eyes, and Steve felt his resolve, already battered by over a week of begging, crumble away.

“Fine,” he said, unable to resist a smile at the way Dustin’s eyes lit up. Even his curly hair seemed to inflate with happiness as he beamed at Steve.

“Awesome, dude!” he said. “I’ll tell everyone you’re coming then! Remember, Friday after school in Mike’s basement, five o’clock on the dot! Don’t be late!”

Steve shook his head as Dustin bounded off down the hallway, quickly getting lost in the crush of people leaving for the day. What he’d just signed himself up for, he was not quite sure. At least he had the rest of the week to agonize over it, he thought wryly, given that it was only Monday. He closed his eyes, resting his head against his locker for a minute, wondering what his life had become that he was actually kind of looking forward to spending the Friday before winter break began hanging out with a bunch of middle schoolers, one of whom was his ex-girlfriend’s kid brother.

Finally, as the corridor emptied out and the noise of students heading home for the day died down, he peeled himself away from his locker and headed to the gym for basketball practice. At least that usually took his mind off everything else, let him feel a little bit normal in the midst of everything his life had become.

As had become typical for Steve, he avoided the rest of his teammates in the locker rooms as they got ready, ignored the snide barbs thrown his way while he pulled his shirt over his head and swapped out his jeans for gym shorts. Thank god he only had one more semester at this school. Even if he didn’t yet know what life after graduation was



going to bring and had missed all his early application deadlines, he was still looking forward to escaping the crushing weight of the school he used to own.

The gym doors slammed open as he trailed after the rest of the guys out of the locker room, and Billy Hargrove strode in, grinning at the world like he hadn't missed a whole week of practice.

"Hargrove!" the coach shouted when Billy was only a few steps in. "How nice of you to finally join us." Coach Bell's voice dripped with sarcasm, but Billy hardly seemed phased.

"Sorry Coach," he said, eyes flashing with amusement. "I got caught up in something important, couldn't miss it."

Coach Bell's mouth tightened at the flippant excuse. "Get changed," he said, "and then you're on laps."

"How many?"

"As many as it takes for me to decide you're ready to rejoin practice."

"Sure thing, Coach." Billy jogged to the locker room, but only Steve was watching close enough to see the way his smirk dropped as soon as his back was turned to Coach Bell.

It was halfway through practice before Coach Bell deemed Billy ready to rejoin everyone else.

Steve's eyes caught on the hard lines of Billy's chest and abs as he dragged his shirt off before joining everyone else on the court. He didn't realize he was staring till Tommy rammed into him, laughing as he called out, "Watch it, Harrington!" before jogging away with the ball. Steve dragged his eyes back to the practice game, teeth grinding. Fucking Hargrove, and his distracting fucking *everything*. If only he'd just stayed gone.

At the end of basketball practice, Steve was covered in sweat and panting from exertion, but aside from his one slip up he'd managed to keep his attention on the game at least. As everyone was headed in to the locker room, Coach Bell's shout brought Steve up short.

“Harrington! Hargrove! My office, now!”

Billy rolled his eyes, but Steve was confused. In his office, Coach Bell was standing in front of his desk, leaning against the fake wood and pinching the bridge of his nose. “Hargrove,” he said, fixing a flat stare on both boys. “Would your absence last week have anything to do with the reason Harrington showed up with his face all bruised up?” Neither boy said anything. “Look,” the coach continued, when his silence produced no results, “I’m happy to see a bit of healthy rivalry on the court - it keeps you boys working hard and pushing yourselves. What I’m less happy about is two of my boys beating the shit out of each other, on the court or off it. This happens again, and you’re both off the team.”

Steve’s head shot up, a protest forming on his lips, but Billy dragged him away before he could give voice to the words. “Yeah, Coach, we got it,” Billy said, dragging Steve out the door.

“What the hell, man?” Steve asked, wrenching his arm from Billy’s grasp and pushing Billy away once they were out of the coach’s office.

“Yeah, yeah, fuck you too, whatever,” Billy replied, which didn’t answer any of Steve’s questions at all.

Steve’s face twisted in annoyance, and he jogged after Billy, who was already walking towards the locker room, to catch up. “Seriously, man, not cool!” Steve said, coming up beside Billy. “I know you’re fucked in the head, but you better not get me kicked off the team. You weren’t even that banged up, you fucked up my face way more than I hurt yours, so I know that’s not why you didn’t show!”

Billy twisted, grabbing Steve’s collar and shoving him against the wall. Taken by surprise, Steve let himself be pushed, mouth open on a voiceless protest. “Look, Harrington,” Billy said, getting close enough to Steve’s face that Steve could smell the cigarette smoke on his breath, “Why I skipped practice is none of your business. It won’t happen again, and if it does I’ll make sure Coach knows it wasn’t your fault so you don’t lose your precious spot.”

Steve’s mouth opened and closed a few times, before he nodded.

“Alright,” he said, finally.

Billy’s scowl disappeared in a flash, replaced by his usual grin as though the frown had never existed. “Great,” Billy said with a smile full of teeth. He dropped his hand from Steve’s collar and was nearly at the locker room before Steve moved, jogging to catch up once again.

“Yeah, well, great,” Steve mumbled, staring at the floor as he followed Billy through the door.

In the locker room, the rest of the guys were getting dressed and packing up. By the time Steve and Billy had stripped down and entered the shower area, everyone else was already leaving. A few shouted insults and one checked shoulder later, and Steve was alone with Billy Hargrove. Like the dick he was, Billy waited till Steve had chosen a showerhead and followed him to the one right next to him, instead of picking literally any of the other showers in the big empty room.

Electricity like an impending storm crackled in the air.

It made Steve’s skin itch.

Steve glanced over at Billy, showering next to him for once in blessed silence, eyes trailing over the other boy before he did a double take in the middle of his staring. A faded yellow bruise spread over his ribs, and before Steve could think through his words he was asking, “Jesus, Hargrove, what did those kids do to you after you knocked me out?”

Something dark and dangerous, like the flower-mouth of a demodog and tunnels full of fear, flashed in Billy’s eyes as his mouth tightened into a grim line. It made the breath catch in Steve’s throat, made something nameless twist in his gut.

The expression disappeared a second later, so fast Steve wondered if he’d imagined it, replaced with a sideways smirk and heat burning his eyes, tunnels gone up in roaring flames, and suddenly Steve’s space was invaded by a too warm body and the overwhelming scent of cigarettes and cheap soap and bad cologne. Billy leaned in close to

Steve, too close when they were both naked and alone under the hot spray of water, so close Steve could feel Billy's breath on the side of his face when Billy drawled, "So, Harrington, that shit that's been in the news lately, about the poison or whatever that lab was working on? It was actually those dog things, wasn't it? They killed that chick last year, and somehow only you and a bunch of kids and maybe a few other people know about it."

It was a blatantly obvious subject change, but Steve could hardly remember what it had even changed from with Billy in his space like that.

*Act like you don't care*, Steve thinks, but he doesn't care about Billy Hargrove.

No, really.

"Yeah," Steve said, voice shaking with something he couldn't pin down. He didn't miss the warmth when Billy drew away, tongue darting out to wet pink lips as he retreated back under his own spray of water.

"Thought so," Billy said, rubbing soap over his chest. "Wanna tell me why the fuck a bunch of monsters in Nowhere, Indiana, are being covered up on the local news?"

"Why do you care?" Steve asked, dragging his eyes away with a jerk as Billy's soapy hands moved lower. "It's over, so there's nothing left to worry about."

Billy snorted. "Nothing to worry about, huh?" he asked. "Sure, if you say so. But if you're wrong and any of this ends up getting Max hurt, I will finish what I started on your face, Harrington. Understood?"

Steve risked a glance back at Billy, to find those dark eyes boring into him as Billy scratched soap into his hair. "Yeah, I got it," he said. "And I'm not gonna let any of the kids get hurt. Even if you're the one I have to keep them safe from."

A smile flashed over Billy's face at the words. "Good man," he said, reaching over to slap Steve's shoulder. Steve jerked under the touch,

and smiled tentatively back at Billy. When Billy left a few minutes later, finished while Steve was still rinsing suds off his legs, Steve watched him walk away with a frown. His shoulder still tingled where Billy had touched him.

Somehow, even after losing his girlfriend to Jonathan Byers and facing down demodogs with a bunch of kids, Billy Hargrove was still the most confusing thing he'd encountered in his seventeen years of life.

oOo

The rest of the week passed without any more distressing encounters with Billy, as Steve made sure to get in and out of the locker room after every practice in record time. By the time Friday rolled around, he'd given up on even the pretense of not being excited about nerding out with Dustin and the other kids over DnD.

Even if he had less than no idea what playing DnD entailed, it had to be more fun than the week of exams he'd barely studied for and the weird energy that crackled between him and Billy whenever the two caught eyes in the hallway or during classes. Had to be more fun than the empty house he went home to every afternoon, parents gone on one of their endless business trips and Nancy always busy making out with Jonathan.

He was grateful that Mike answered the door when he showed up at five, instead of Nancy or Mrs. Wheeler. At least, he was grateful until Mike took one look at him, turned around, and bellowed back into the house, "Dustin!! What's Steve Harrington doing here?" The sound of pounding footsteps on the basement stairs preceded Dustin's appearance behind Mike, a beaming smile on his face as he took in Steve standing in the doorway.

"I told you," Dustin said, turning towards Mike, "I invited him to DnD this week!"

Mike glared. "We already have enough people, Dustin," he said, but Dustin wasn't deterred.

"You invited Eleven, and Lucas invited Max," he said, face set in a

mulish expression. “Why can’t I invite Steve?”

The two boys held a silent staring contest for long enough that Steve started feeling twitchy, and was just wondering if he should take it upon himself to back out as gracefully as he could, when Mike finally looked away with a sigh and stepped away from the door.

“Whatever,” he said, still looking at Dustin. “But if he makes fun of us, he’s out.”

“Dudes,” Steve said, “I’m not going to make fun of your nerd game.”

Dustin and Mike both leveled Steve with flat looks, and he backtracked immediately. “I mean, your DnD game. It sounds cool.” Mike looked like he wanted to protest again, but was distracted when a girl’s voice floated up from the basement.

“Where are you guys? I made my character.”

Down in the basement, all the kids, along with Max and that weird girl, Eleven, who had the crazy mind powers and had closed the gate, were gathered around a table with a game board and little figurines of fantasy creatures set out. “Hey Steve,” Max said with a wave. “Eleven just finished creating her character, so now you’re all that’s left.” Her smile was nearly as sharp as Billy’s, though it was infinitely kinder at the same time.

“Right,” Steve said, lowering himself down between Max and Dustin. “So, what do I do?”

An hour later, he had to admit this wasn’t nearly as dumb as he’d expected.

“You walk into the cave, footsteps echoing against the wet stone, the sound of the stream running deeper in drowning out anything else, and everyone rolls a perception check,” Mike said.

They went around the table, Dustin groaning as he rolled a critical failure, tripping over some loose rock. Steve’s roll was much more successful, and he clapped Dustin on the back, whooping. “Hah! I’ll keep you safe, kid,” he said, grinning.

Dustin squirmed away and pouted adorably at him. “You don’t need to keep me safe!” he protested. “Just because I’m a bard instead of a knight doesn’t mean I need protection!”

Before Steve could retaliate, the radio in the blanket fort across the room crackled to life. “Hey, you kids there?” Hopper’s voice came in through the static.

Mike dove for the radio, abandoning the game amidst a chorus of groans. “Yes, sir, we read you loud and clear,” he said.

“Great,” Hopper said. “Can you let Eleven know I’m outside? It’s time to head back home.”

Eleven lifted the radio out of Mike’s hand, and he let it go easily. “Snow ball?” she said. Hopper was apparently much more fluent in the kid’s strange way of talking, as he replied immediately.

“Yeah kid,” he said, voice unusually soft over the radio. “You’ll be back for the Snow Ball.” Mike beamed next to her, face holding the kind of sappy expression Steve used to wear when staring at Nancy.

“Ok,” Eleven said, putting the radio down. She gathered her stuff, and Mike trailed her up the stairs, no doubt so they could say goodbye to each other in private. Steve shook his head, grinning at the pair. Just because he was going through heartbreak didn’t mean he couldn’t be happy for the kids newly discovering romance.

“I guess that’s my cue to head out, too,” he said, turning back to the group.

“You’ll be back next week though, right?” Surprisingly it was Lucas who answered, and Steve smiled as ruffled the kid’s hair. Lucas squirmed away and glared, frowning even harder when Max laughed at his expression.

“Yeah, course I will be,” he said. “Hey Dustin, you’re coming with me. I promised your mom I’d give you a ride home.”

“Yeah alright,” Dustin said, bounding to his feet and waving goodbye to his friends.

He enjoyed spending time with this kid, more than he'd imagined he would. The kid was definitely on track to be the coolest of his friends, especially with Steve as a mentor, he thought proudly, as he dropped Dustin off in front of the kid's house ten minutes later. "Wait," he said, as Dustin reached for the door handle.

Dustin turned back to him, confusion wrinkling up his nose as Steve shoved a brown paper bag into his hands. "Remember," Steve said, as Dustin pulled the Farrah Fawcett spray out of the bag with reverential hands, "damp, *not wet*, and four puffs." He smiled, a flash of teasing in his voice as he added, "I'll know if you did it right when I pick you up to drive you to the Snow Ball, so don't forget yeah?"

Dustin shoved the spray back in the bag and smiled at Steve, and Steve was taken aback by the strength of the rush of fondness that coursed through him. This wasn't even close to how he'd once imagined he'd be spending his last winter break of high school, single, playing DnD with a bunch of kids, and driving one of said kids to a middle school dance, but he was happy. He could do without the monsters, but the shining look in Dustin's eyes as he said goodbye and slipped out of Steve's car to run into his home – that part he wouldn't trade for the world.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Comments give me life, so please do let me know what you thought!



### 3. Frost and Fire

Five steps forward. Five steps back. Turn. Repeat.

Billy's eyes caught on Max's when he made his third pass in front of the open bathroom door, pinning him in place for a few too long seconds.

The Snow Ball was happening tonight, a dumb middle school dance held in the school gym, and Billy had been informed a week ago that he was driving his little sister to it, *and picking her up too, ya hear?* It was fucking stupid, but she really wanted to go, and what the little princess wanted, the little princess got.

Even if she had to threaten her older stepbrother's dick with a baseball bat to get it.

Five steps forward, five steps back.

If she wasn't ready soon, he was going to wear a hole right through the floor.

"Done!" she shouted a moment later, as though sensing his thoughts.

"About fucking time," he muttered, fingers fidgeting with the cigarette carton in his pocket. He glanced reflexively at his dad; if the man heard him cursing at Max, he'd be looking at hell when he got home. Luckily, Neil's eyes were glued to the shitty television in the living room.

Max was already bounding out the door when he looked away, and he hurried to follow, shrugging on his jacket. Even driving his stepsister to a middle school dance was preferable to hanging around the house any longer.

And maybe, he'd see Harrington.

"You should tell Steve you're sorry," Max said when they were halfway to the school, breaking through the music that filled the otherwise silent car. Billy gritted his teeth against the first few responses he had for that stupid suggestion, knuckles going white on

the steering wheel. Max, for some reason, took his silence as encouragement to keep talking instead of the warning it was to shut up. "He's a good guy, and he didn't deserve what you did to his face. Just cause your dad doesn't like you doesn't mean you have to take it out on everyone else around you."

Billy almost stopped the car and made her walk. Instead, he gripped the steering wheel till it creaked and growled out, "Shut. Up." He could feel the weight of Max's glare from the passenger seat, but he refused to look. He'd been doing so well since she knocked him out. Hadn't smashed her little friends through any walls or told her exactly where she could shove the next needle full of drugs she found in some random stranger's house. Hadn't done anything *really* mean in weeks, and he was fucking itchy with it.

"Whatever, dickhead," she said. The rest of the car ride was spent in a blessed lack of conversation, and Billy practically breathed a sigh of relief when the school finally came into view, all decked out and lit up for a bunch of kids to sway around awkwardly in the first ugly throes of puberty.

And just his luck, that was Steve Harrington's car, pulling into a spot off in a corner of the parking lot after the little curly haired kid bounded out of his car.

"Remember," he said to Max as she reached for the door handle, attention still on Harrington's car, "I'll pick you up in 2 hours. Don't be late!" The threat of bats to the dick didn't hold a candle to Neil Hargrove when his son failed to make it home on time.

As soon as she was in the door, Billy was shifting into gear and sliding into the space next to Harrington. Smoke curled out the open driver side window, and Billy realized with a start that the golden boy had a cigarette between his fingers.

"I thought the princess cured you of nasty habits," Billy said, sliding over to the passenger seat to talk to Harrington. The fucking nerd startled at Billy's voice and flung the cigarette to the ground.

"The hell are you doing here?" he asked, when recognition lit in his eyes.

Billy pasted on a smirk. "Dropping of my sister," he said, lighting his own cigarette and licking his lips before sliding it between them. He breathed in nicotine, and exhaled smoke and lingering frustration into the cold air between their cars. "Now I've got a few hours to kill and nothing to do. Wanna go for a ride?" His tongue slipped out to lick along his bottom lip, and his eyebrows raised in blatant invitation.

Harrington's eyebrows climbed nearly into his hairline. "Why would I go for a ride with *you*?" he asked, and Billy resisted the urge to snarl back.

"Because I want to apologize for fucking up your face so bad," he said, words bit out around clenched teeth, fingers digging into his thighs to remind himself that he actually for real *wanted* to be nice for once. And really, he did feel bad about how far he'd gone that night. He'd just wanted to break things, and Harrington's face had been such an easy target.

But that was weeks ago, now. It wasn't a big fucking deal anymore. *Well, the part where the first few punches thrown by King Steve kept replaying in his fantasies at night might have been a big deal, but that probably wasn't what Harrington was hung up on. If only.*

Harrington's face now had disbelief etched into it in wide eyes and the downward curve of his mouth, in the angry flare of his nose and the searching way he caught Billy's eyes with his own piercing gaze. Billy took another drag from his cigarette, whole body lit up in jittery nerves as he waited for Harrington's response.

"This isn't some ploy to get me out in the middle of the woods and murder me, is it?" Harrington asked, and Billy couldn't help the laugh that spilled over his lips as he tossed the cigarette butt to the ground next to Harrington's.

"Nah," he said, all false confidence and writhing nerves. "If I wanted you dead I'd just introduce you to my dad." Harrington frowned, and Billy shut his mouth so fast his teeth clicked, mind lit up with a litany of *fuck fuck fuck*. At least he'd stopped his stupid fucking mouth before the *as my boyfriend* slipped out. He would have left then and there, probably, if Harrington's door hadn't opened, Harrington's

sneakered feet dropping to the asphalt and then bridging the gap between their cars.

“Alright,” Harrington said, leaning against the passenger door. “Move over, and we can go somewhere all dark and secret for you to apologize where no one can overhear you being a halfway decent person.”

Billy might have been embarrassed about the graceless way he scrambled back into the driver’s seat, but his senses were too caught up on Harrington - on *Steve* sliding into the passenger seat of his car. For once, Billy waited till he was on the road, decently far from the school, before flicking the stereo on. They were going somewhere dark and *secret*, after all. Cirith Ungol blasted from the speakers once they were out of earshot of the school, sliding under his skin and unknotting all his tightly wound muscles. His foot relaxed down on the gas pedal, till they were flying down the empty road of this stupid nowhere town, and a whoop tore free of his throat.

When he let his head loll sideways, glancing out of the corner of his eyes at Steve while his tongue darted out to wet the corner of his mouth, Steve was gripping the window frame and staring at Billy with wide doe eyes, breath dragging in and out of his body like a prayer. He was fucking beautiful. The prettiest thing in this whole goddamn town, and *fuck*, but Billy wanted him.

“What is this band?” Steve said, picking up on Billy’s attention, and Billy grinned shark-like and mean.

“If you can figure it out, I’ll let you blow me.”

It seemed impossible for Steve’s eyes to get wider, but they did.

“Shouldn’t it be you who blows me if I figure it out,” Steve said back, words far more breathless than the snark he was probably aiming for, and Billy’s lips curled up to expose his teeth.

“Nah, takes more’n that to get *my* mouth on your dick.” Over the music, he heard Steve choke on his own saliva.

“Jesus, you’re such a jerk, Hargrove.”

“Billy.”

“What?”

“I apologized, and you got in the car. Think that qualifies you to use my name.”

Steve huffed. “Sure, whatever you say, *Billy*.”

It was almost too soft to be heard under the music, but the sound of his name in Steve’s mouth had him melting back into his seat and smiling so wide his face hurt. He turned the music up louder to drown out any more conversation, to make sure the moment wasn’t ruined before he had a chance to finish savoring the feeling, and the Camaro sped down the road, a point of light and warmth and noise in the shitty cold December night.

oOo

The car glided to a smooth stop on a bluff overlooking the quarry just outside the town. A flick of Billy’s hand cut short *Death of the Sun*, and a second later he had a cigarette in his mouth and his seat reclined, blowing smoke across the car as he tilted his head towards Steve, hooded eyes trailing up and down Steve’s gorgeous body.

“So,” Steve said after a minute of silence, “you wanted to apologize to me for breaking my face when I tried to stop you from attacking a bunch of kids?” He stared at his hands, fingers twisting together.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Already apologized to you, dipshit. Or were you too dazzled by my stunning good looks to pay attention?”

Steve’s gaze darted sideways towards Billy, a frown on his face. “That wasn’t an apology,” he blurted, outrage thick in his voice.

“What do you want me to do, beg for forgiveness and swear it’ll never happen again?”

“Uh, that’d be a nice start, yeah.”

Billy yanked the cigarette from between his teeth and rolled his head

till he was staring at the ceiling of his car instead of Harrington's infuriatingly confused face. This wasn't going at all how he'd anticipated. Should have figured he'd fuck this up without even trying. Fucking shit up *was* the only thing he was good at these days, after all.

"Jesus, whatever, I'm sorry alright," he said, stabbing the cigarette out in the ashtray between their seats. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched Steve's eyes track the motion.

"Alright," he said, the single word breathed out like a benediction between them.

Silence fell inside the car. All the words Billy halfway wanted to say, to explain himself, offer something real, the least bit of what Steve deserved if he let himself be honest for a minute, refused to coalesce inside his throat. There was broken glass beneath his tongue, cutting deeper every time he took a breath and tried to make the words form that would bring this night back to something easy and fun.

"You got any beer?" Steve said, shattering the tension wrapping around them both.

A grin bloomed across Billy's face and he replied, "Nah, but I got something else just as good." He reached over, elbow brushing against Steve's thigh as he opened the glove compartment. Steve's eyes were fixed on the point of contact, and Billy practically had to wave the joint under his nose to regain his attention.

Not that he actually minded where else Steve's attention had been.

"Shit," Steve said. "Is that pot?"

Laughter bubbled up out of Billy. "Yeah, dumbass, it's pot."

The tiny flame that flickered to life when he opened his lighter with a snap of his wrist threw the interior of the car into wavering blocks of light and shadow. Steve's eyes tracked the joint as Billy brought it to his lips and took a long drag, letting the smoke settle in his bones.

His fingers brushed Steve's when he handed over the joint, and his

skin buzzed at the point of contact.

There were calluses on Steve's fingers.

Calluses that would feel really fucking good wrapped around Billy's dick.

He thought about moving, getting his hands on more of Steve, but he was glued to his seat by the blood pumping hot and heavy through his veins.

"This is good shit," Steve said, passing the joint back, and Billy felt a smile unfurl on his face.

"Yeah it fucking is," he said, memories swamping over him like warm Pacific waves. "It's the last of what I brought from Cali. Can't get shit like this out here."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't smoked in forever."

A derisive snort floated up to burst against the roof. "Yeah. I heard the princess had you real whipped."

Even without looking, Billy could feel the glare in Steve's voice. "Don't," he said. "Don't talk about her like that."

"Like what?" Billy was honestly confused. He hadn't even called her a bitch or nothing.

"Like she was controlling me, or something," Steve snatched the joint out of Billy's hand, and there was a pause between his words. "I wanted to be better, when I was with her. She didn't make me do anything, except realize what a shitty person I was before I fell in love with her."

Billy scowled and stole the joint back, taking another drag. It was wet and warm from being in Steve's mouth, but all he could think of was Steve's mouth on that bitch, Nancy Wheeler.

Sorry, Steve. That *delightful fucking princess* Nancy.

*Ugh. Fucking gag me with a spoon.*

The pot sparking in his blood dulled the jealous anger he could feel like a solid weight on his chest, and he licked a wet stripe up the joint before handing it back. *Suck it, Nancy Wheeler.*

Jesus. Any more thoughts like that and he belonged back at the dance with all the little kids.

“Why are you always such a jerk?” Steve asked, breaking the syrupy thick silence.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Why are you always such a golden boy?”

Steve just made a face at him, tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth and nose all scrunched up, and Billy was fucked because it was the most adorable face he’d ever seen.

They settled into a companionable semi-silence after that, trading spit-slick pot and occasional barbs back and forth till the joint was burned down to nothing and Billy realized, through the buzzing in his skin, that it was time to head back if he didn’t want to be late.

“You’re not so bad, Harrington,” he said as he righted his seat and turned the key in the ignition, feeling the rumble of the starting car purr through him.

“I’d say the same to you, but I hate lying,” Steve said, but there was a smile at the corners of his mouth when Billy looked at him.

The drive back was slower, his aggression dulled down by pot smoke and the bloodshot eyes watching him sidelong from a few short feet away. He took the curves and turns of the empty back roads with a lazy apathy, mind continually drifting towards Steve in the passenger seat, just as red-eyed and fucked up as Billy for once in this miserable year.

Still not where Billy wanted him, though. Life for once had handed him the perfect opportunity to make his move, and instead he froze up.

Sliding into the parking lot of the school felt like getting punched in the face after the quiet dark of the drive back.



Lights and laughter and music spilled out the doors to the gym, along with the kids ready to head home as their little dance wound down. Next to Billy, Steve straightened up from the slump he'd relaxed into. Billy slid the gears to neutral, set the parking break, and gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands.

His palms smeared sweat on the wheel as Steve turned towards him.

He'd been working up to this for over a week, ever since that day in the showers after he finally started going to practice again, when he'd felt the energy crackling between them like a live wire, and *knew* that Steve felt it too this time. Billy could read attraction from a mile away, and Steve Harrington was definitely attracted to him, maybe had been for a while. There was no way he was wrong.

Steve's mouth opened, and Billy practically lunged across the space between them, covering Steve's mouth with his own in a messy, graceless kiss. A confused noise huffed against his lips, and Billy swallowed it, pushed harder, followed the retreating mouth under his till he realized that Steve wasn't kissing back, wasn't even frozen in shock.

Was actively moving away, bringing up his hands to push Billy off, and Billy nearly shot through his own door in his haste to back up and pretend the last few seconds had never happened.

"What the fuck, I thought you were just fucking with me!"

So much for pretending.

"If you tell anyone about this, I'll fucking kill you," he said, fingers wrapping around the steering wheel like a lifeline. "Get the fuck out."

"What?"

"Get. Out. Of. The fucking. Car."

He kept his eyes glued to the windshield, blind to the dark shadows beyond the smooth wall of glass, as the door opened and closed.

A few minutes later, the door opened again. The dashboard clock shifted into focus in front of him. Max was right on time.

“Did you apologize to Steve?” she asked as he slid his hand around the gearshift. “I saw his car.”

“Shut up,” he growled, hand tightening without shifting into gear. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

Instead of taking the hint, Max soldiered on with conversation.

“My friends and I are gonna hang out at Mike’s place tomorrow.”

“I really don’t fucking give a shit.”

“God, Billy, why are you such a dickhead all the time?”

Billy spun around, grabbing the collar of her pretty little sweater and shoving her back against the seat.

“I told you to shut. The fuck. Up,” he growled.

Her eyes veered sideways as she shrank back as much as she was able. “Fine,” she said, lips twisting against the word. “Dunno what crawled up your butt and died, but whatever.”

Billy slowly withdrew his hands and resumed his grip on the steering wheel.

Jesus. No wonder Steve fucking Harrington couldn’t fucking stand him. He was never going to be anything but a mean fucking fuckup. His stomach clenched, and his throat locked up, but he grit his teeth till it hurt against the wetness in his eyes.

Fuck Steve Harrington, and fuck everyone and everything in this stupid fucking town.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I would like to note that I do not condone driving while high. I also know that teenage boys can be reckless idiots who think they're invincible though, and it seemed true to Billy's character especially.

## 4. Bad Boys Running Wild

### Notes for the Chapter:

So this one took a bit longer than the others, but look! There is actual plot finally creeping in!

Steve collapsed on his bed as soon as he got home, mind still buzzing with a lingering high. Once upon a time, he'd been a normal teenage boy.

Right?

Then monsters from another world happened, and Nancy slapped him into wanting to be a better person, but he was still not *that* far off normal. The monster got defeated (apparently by a small child the age of Nancy's little brother... who knew?), Nancy took him back, and he still got invited to parties even if he wasn't interested in being king of the school anymore.

Except, the monsters came back, and Nancy never really loved him, and.

Well.

And some asshole from California came along and reminded Steve of how he'd felt the first time he noticed how pretty Nancy Wheeler had become.

Some asshole *guy* who also threatened the kids Steve was becoming way too fond of and bashed Steve's face in, and then shared pot with him and kissed him only a few weeks later.

Even Dustin had noticed something was up with him when Steve was driving him home.

*"You're being quiet. Are you okay?"*

*"Yeah, kid, I'm fine." He shot Dustin a smile, but the kid was too perceptive.*

*"Why are your eyes so red?"*

*"I smoked a cigarette for the first time in forever, and the smoke got in my eyes."*

*"Ew, why?"*

*"I was sad about Nancy." If he wasn't so high, he might have thought Dustin squirmed at that. But he was high, and everything squirmed a bit in his vision. He eased into a lower gear, just to be safe. "So I did something stupid. Hey kid, don't ever smoke, okay?"*

*"Of course. Smoking is fucking gross."*

*"So, how was the dance?"*

*Dustin definitely squirmed at that. "It was okay."*

*"Did you dance with any cute girls?"*

*"One."*

*"Was she pretty?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"That's my boy." Dustin ducked away too slow to stop Steve from messing up his perfect curls, and Steve grinned at him.*

*He knew this kid was gonna be a lady killer.*

Unfortunately, while Dustin was dancing with a pretty girl, Steve had been getting high with and hit on by Billy Hargrove.

It wasn't like Steve was *really* freaking out about being kissed by a guy. He wasn't exactly open about it, but there was a reason he'd seen *The Outsiders* three times even though it only came out last year, and it sure wasn't the plot. Not to mention the time at fourteen when he'd caught a glimpse of Tommy's dick in the locker room and jerked off to nothing else for a whole week, till Chrissy Stevens let him put his hand up her shirt under the bleachers after a football game, and her soft curves took over the starring role in his fantasies.

So, he wasn't gay, but he also wasn't one hundred percent not gay, either.

No. The problem wasn't whether or not Steve liked boys. The problem was that, even if he was attractive, Billy Hargrove was a grade A dick. A grade A dick who had recently beat Steve's face in. And if the state of his face hadn't been enough, Steve had stopped enjoying the company of assholes when Nancy slapped some sense into him. That was hardly going to change just because they weren't dating anymore.

So, Billy. The guy who got adrenaline boners in the middle of a fight and apparently had been flirting for real with Steve, in his weird asshole way.

Maybe if Steve just avoided him forever, they could both pretend tonight had never happened. Avoidance had never worked for Steve yet, but Steve Harrington was an idiot, so he kept hoping one of these days it would.

He fell asleep with the lights still on, a habit he'd acquired after darkness started reminding him too much of tunnels underground.

He dreamed of Billy's lips on his, of Billy's teeth turning razor sharp, of his face opening up to reveal a sightless monster's maw.

He woke up sweat-soaked and screaming, glad for his too-big empty house, with all the neighbors too far away to hear his nightmares.

All in all, it was a fairly normal night to follow up his decidedly abnormal evening.

oOo

The winter holiday passed more quickly than he expected. Most of his time was spent hanging out with middle schoolers, either babysitting or playing DnD, sometimes both at the same time. The moms all loved him for the first one – Dustin's mom had taken to pushing baked goods on him whenever he watched Dustin. The second one he was getting better at.

He was also avoiding anywhere that Billy Hargrove might show up.

Including all the holiday parties that he'd lost interest in anyway.

His parents barely noticed his new social life; he spent Christmas Eve eating dinner at the Byers' house, doing his best to avoid staring too longingly at Nancy as she and Jonathan stared at each other. The effort was made easier when Dustin and Lucas corralled him into an argument about whether he should use the experience he'd earned in their last DnD game on attack or defense points.

"I bet Max would agree with me!"

"Max doesn't even know DnD! She only started playing at the same time as Steve!"

"At least she read the whole rulebook!"

"Yeah, because she's our age and doesn't have to spend all her time applying to college like Steve!"

Steve winced. Dustin's adamant defense of Steve was heartwarming, but wrong. "Applying to college" was the excuse he gave Dustin any time he couldn't hang out.

The truth was, some days Steve was just too tired to be around other people, full of a bone deep weariness that sat strangely on his seventeen year old body. The early admissions deadlines for his parents' top choices had all already passed, and he hadn't turned in a single application. It would have been easy to blame the failure on the return of the Upside Down, on Nancy leaving him, on the constant irritation of Billy Hargrove flooding his sense even when the asshole wasn't around, but those were only really convenient excuses. Even before any of that happened, he'd been struggling.

He looked away from the kids, and caught Nancy watching him, a frown on her pretty face.

His ears burned as he looked down, tracing a scratch in the old wooden table with his eyes and avoiding her for the rest of dinner. Tonight was a good night, good enough that he was out with people instead of holed up alone in his room, music and lights turned up high enough to drown the shadows.

Nancy finally caught him when Mike dragged the other boys off to consult with Eleven on some AV club stuff.

“How are you?” she asked, and he smiled at her a bit hopelessly.

“Good. I’m good.”

The look she gave him was far too understanding. “We’re glad you could make it,” she said, and it killed him just a little, that “we” meant her and Jonathan now.

“I’m glad I could make it too,” he said anyway, and looking at the kids huddled together around the living room coffee table, he even kind of meant it. A year ago, he would never have imagined that only one year later he’d be spending Christmas Eve at his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend’s home with a bunch of kids, one of whom had some kind of psychic powers that Steve still wasn’t one hundred percent clear on, and the chief of police who had adopted said psychic kid, instead of out at a party being a normal teenage boy.

It wasn’t exactly a perfect setup, but he was happier than he expected. As long as he didn’t think too hard about either the future or the past.

“You missed your early application deadlines.” Nancy’s hand on his arm brought him right back to one of the subjects he was avoiding. It wasn’t a question - she had heard Dustin making Steve’s excuses.

Old yellow lights flickered in their casings, casting shadows over the walls as he looked everywhere but Nancy’s eyes. There were no Christmas lights twinkling on the inside of the Byers’ house.

“I’d rather not talk about it,” he said. She frowned at him again, but he even if he had wanted to talk, he wouldn’t know what to say. The future was barreling towards them both, and their paths had diverged months ago, even if Steve had taken a while to realize.

“The kids really look up to you,” she said, and his heart throbbed with gratitude to her for the subject change. He even managed a small smile when he replied.

“No idea why.”

“Because you care about them.”

Steve didn't know what to say to that.

Off in a corner of the room, Eleven stood silent next to Mike while he gestured wildly at a skeptical Lucas and a far more excited Dustin. He wondered if Mike was explaining more weird stuff Eleven could do with her brain. Maybe she had learned how to create ice cream out of thin air.

Hopefully they weren't old enough yet for her to try creating anything more illegal out of thin air.

A soft smile lit Nancy's face when he finally looked at her. It was beautiful, just as everything she did was beautiful, and he hoped that Jonathan was making her happy. She deserved to smile all the time.

“It's too bad Max couldn't make it. We could use some more girls in the party.”

“Lucas said her dad didn't like the family being apart on Christmas Eve.” Not that that would likely stop Billy. Nothing seemed likely to stop Billy.

*If I wanted you dead, I'd introduce you to my dad.*

Then again, maybe he was stuck at home. Steve shook off the thought. Not his business.

“That's too bad for her. Thanks for agreeing to take Mike home, though. It means a lot to me that we can still be friends.”

“Of course.”

It was strange, that being friends with Nancy squeezed iron bands around his chest just like his nightmares of the Upside Down, but he wouldn't trade it for the world anyway. Nancy was so *good*, and Steve? Steve was trying to be good too.

“Speaking of, we should head out soon. Dustin's mom wants him home by nine.”



“I’ll see you next Friday, for Mike’s game night?”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. We’re in the middle of some kind of enchanted forest. I think.”

She was still smiling at him, the soft smile that crinkled up the corners of her eyes, that he used to think meant she loved him. Just because he knew better now didn’t mean he found it any less beautiful. He could get lost in Nancy Wheeler’s eyes. Instead, he ducked his head and pushed off the wall, striding over to the kids and away from the best piece of his past.

“Come on guys,” he said, narrowly avoiding calling them dipshits with Mrs. Byers and Hopper barely ten feet away. “I promised your moms I’d get you home safe and sound. Mike took a bit longer than Dustin and Lucas to collect his coat and hat, dragging his feet to spend a few more precious moments with Eleven. It was a little nuts how devoted those two kids were to each other, and Steve worked hard not to feel the tiny stab of jealousy that watching them provoked.

For once, Dustin picked the backseat of Steve’s car, so that he could continue to whisper argue with the others about their still unresolved AV club plots. Steve tuned them out, cranking the heat up full blast against the chilly car and turning his head to the shadows outside as he backed out of the Byers’ driveway. Even with the melancholy lapping always at the edges of awareness, it had been a good night.

oOo

Gray slush and gray skies heralded the return of school in January, as well as the end of Steve’s easy avoidance of one Billy Hargrove. Not that he couldn’t still try.

Of course with Steve’s luck, it took about three seconds for that plan to fail.

He was grabbing his books out of his locker for first period, when Billy’s voice down the hall drew his eyes like a compass needle straight to north. Billy was leaning next to Allison Kilroy’s locker at the end of the hall, shark grin on his face as he brushed a lock of hair

behind her ear and said something Steve was too far away to make out. By the way Allison laughed and ducked her head, it had probably been something dumb but charming.

Steve could swear Billy's gaze flicked up over Allison's shoulder for the barest moment, eyes cutting through the mess of students greeting each other after the holiday and locking Steve in place. But he must have imagined it, because a second later Billy was leaning down to kiss her right there in the hallway. Didn't stop till a passing junior shouted, "Gross! Get a room!" to a chorus of giggles and jeers.

The lurch in his stomach meant nothing he wanted to think about.

He dragged his eyes away and slammed his locker, ducking through the bland white halls to first period, and did his best to scrub the memory of what he'd just seen from the inside of his eyelids. It was only moderately successful.

Luckily for his avoiding Billy plans, Billy didn't bother Steve all day. The classes they shared passed without any harassment, even when alphabetical seating had them right next to each other. Billy smiled and flirted with any girl who looked his way, but Steve may as well have been empty space for all the attention Billy paid him.

For some reason, the kids were avoiding him too.

Steve had agreed to drive Dustin, Mike, and Lucas home every day after AV club, and he was starting to get tired of all the whispering in the back seats that kept happening. Not to mention the weird pang in his chest that Dustin had abandoned his treasured front seat to sit in the back and whisper too. Steve had thought he was becoming a part of the party. It was a weird sort of painful, being sidelined by a group of middle schoolers who had become his closest friends.

Friday rolled around as gray and cold and miserable as the rest of the week, and Steve's plans to push for some answers got sidelined as soon as he pulled up to the middle school and Max, Eleven, and Will piled into his car with the other boys. They didn't even remotely all fit, but somehow they crammed themselves in close enough that they weren't spilling out the windows as soon as the doors were closed.

“Sleepover,” Eleven said at his raised eyebrows.

Mrs. Byers and Mrs. Henderson had already signed off on the weekend sleepover, but, “I don’t remember Chief Hopper agreeing to this,” he said. Mike rolled his eyes.

“You can call him on the radio when we get home,” the kid said.

Steve pointed a gloved finger at Max. “You’re allowed on this sleepover too?”

Bingo. Her eyes skated away and her shoulders twitched up in a shrug as she lied her ass off. “Yeah, of course,” she said, one hand coming halfway up in an aborted thumbs up. “Everything’s cool.”

“If your step-brother kills me over this, I blame you.”

“Billy said it’s fine if you picked me up today. He’s on a date.” Her face relaxed, nose wrinkling up in honest distaste, so that part at least was probably true. Steve’s stomach clenched, and he ignored it.

“And you think he’ll be gone all night?”

She shrugged. “Probably? I dunno, it’s Billy. He’s gross.”

That news shouldn’t have meant anything to Steve. Didn’t mean anything to Steve. Was mercifully banished from his mind when a frowning Dustin piped up, “Come on guys, can’t we just tell him already? It’s *Steve*!”

A chorus of groans and “Dustin!” filled the car. Thank god Steve hadn’t left the parking lot yet, because his attention wasn’t even remotely on the car anymore. “Tell me what?” he said, slowly, fixing each of the kids with his best glare.

It was, unexpectedly, Eleven who spoke first.

“We’re going to find more sisters,” she said. Steve’s forehead wrinkled in confusion, a look that was apparently more than Dustin could handle as he was the second to break.

“We’re going to Hawkin’s lab so Eleven can use the energy there or

some shit to find the rest of the kids that were experimented on like her!" Lucas punched his shoulder, and Mike facepalmed.

Steve took a deep breath, and counted to ten. "You're going to *what*."

"We're going to Hawkin's lab to help Eleven find the rest of her family," Mike said, more willing to talk now that the cat was out of the bag, and Jesus that kid could look more serious than a demogorgon when it came to his psychic girlfriend.

"Right," Steve said, after taking another deep breath. "And you guys were going to do this alone?"

"No!" Dustin said at the same time Mike said a defiant, "Yes."

Dustin and Mike held a silent glaring contest.

"Pretty sure Chief Hopper didn't sign up for letting you little shits engage in a fun game of breaking and entering during your sleepover."

Dustin broke his staring contest with Mike to turn wide, pleading eyes on Steve. "Steve," he said, the word drawn out as wide as his eyes. "It's her *family*!" Mike crossed his arms and nodded, while Lucas and Max watched Steve warily from the seat they were sharing. Even Will was nodding along, and Steve had really hoped if any of the kids might have been on his side, it'd be the one with who'd been possessed by the damn Mindflayer and nearly died in that stupid fucking lab.

"Sisters," Eleven agreed.

"What if the place is still dangerous?" Steve asked, though his resolve was crumbling in the face of so many small, pleading faces.

"Come on, you know that's bullshit," Dustin said, and Steve flinched at the word. "Eleven closed the gate and all the demodogs died! Besides, I know you still have your bat in the car!"

Steve turned around, staring at the now mostly empty parking lot before his head thunked into the steering wheel. "Fuck," he muttered, and Dustin leaned forward to pat him on the back.

"It'll be fine, Steve. We know what we're doing, and if there is anything nasty left over, we'll have you."

oOo

Tires squealed as Billy's Camaro raced down dark roads, almost loud enough to drown out the way Allison shrieked every time the back wheels fishtailed on ice.

"Billy! Cut it out!"

A wild laugh tore free of Billy's throat as he took another turn at high speed, before screeching to a halt at his final destination. Hawkin's lab rose up from the surrounding forest like some kind of cartoon villain's lair, all dark concrete and towering walls and caution tape. The front gate was slightly ajar, dark space yawning open and empty between the gate and the glass doors into the lab.

"Surprise!" Billy said, one hand resting on the wheel as he turned to smile full of teeth at an unimpressed Allison in the passenger seat. "Told you I was taking you somewhere you'd never guess."

"Ha ha," she said, voice as flat as the line of her mouth. "Very funny, Billy. Now take me somewhere nicer?" The nervous hands that smoothed down the sides of her dress belied her tough words, and Billy kept smirking.

"What," he said, pulling out a cigarette to slide between his bared teeth before using his free hand to twirl a lock of her hair between his fingers. She flinched away, and he snorted laughter around the cigarette. "You don't like my date idea?"

Honestly, he wasn't even entirely sure why he'd chosen this particular place, either, with a pretty girl he didn't really give a shit about in the front seat and a crowbar in the trunk. He'd been itchy and on edge for ages (since a certain stupid fucking dance if he felt like being honest with himself, which Billy rarely fucking felt like). The bruises from stupid fights he'd picked with his dad had faded by the time school swung back into session, bringing with it people outside his family looking at his face again, and he wanted to fucking hurt something. Why not go for the creepy fucking laboratory in this

weird shithole of a town, that may or may not have been producing mildly terrifying dog monsters no one would talk about, and that had definitely killed at least one loser girl.

If he got to siphon off some of his restless rage into another person at the same time, well that was just a bonus. She was even kind of pretty when her face hardened into a glare and she slapped Billy's hand away.

(Not pretty enough for Billy to be the person his fucking father wanted him to be, because Billy was fucked in the head, but what-*fucking*-ever.)

"I'm serious, Billy," Allison said, voice rising with confidence. "You had your laugh, now let's go somewhere else." She lowered her voice then, reaching a hand out to rub up his thigh. "There's plenty of other places in these woods where we can be alone and have some real fun."

Billy didn't even bother holding back his shudder. "Nope," he said, popping the 'p'. "I want to see what kind of crazy Hawkins has hidden in it's boring little depths."

The hand on his thigh retreated. "Fine, whatever." Allison looked well and truly pissed off, but she also looked small, and it made all the mean parts of Billy feel a little bit bigger. "Everyone said you were an asshole, and clearly I should have listened. Just take me home."

"But our date's not over yet," Billy said, fluttering his eyelashes and pasting on a wide-eyed look of disappointment. Her eyes flitted to the windows, taking in the dark stretch of lonely road and lonely woods surrounding them.

"Seriously," she said, voice wavering, "this isn't fucking funny, Billy."

A low chuckle left his lips, the kind that made the girls in his class and bored housewives alike swoon. "I don't know. I'm having lots of fun. But if you're not having fun, you're welcome to walk home alone."

She stared at him incredulously for a long moment, before huffing out an angry, “Fine!” and grabbing the latch for the door. A cold breeze wafted in, stirring her too short dress, and she hesitated.

Billy stared at her, not making any move to turn the car back on.

“Fine!” she said again, heels clicking on asphalt as she plucked her jacket from the backseat and swung it over her shoulders. She looked back at him once, face set even as she wrapped her arms around her shivering torso. “You’re an asshole, Billy Hargrove. I hope you die like Barb!”

Billy just raised his eyebrows, tongue darting out to wet his smirking lips. “Bye,” he said, and she huffed, turning around and beginning her stomping way back down the road.

When she was out of sight, having looked back only once before hitting the turn, Billy finally let the mask slip, face sliding into an ugly frown and fists clenching as his head knocked back against the driver’s seat. That was one ugly-ass lab, but it was big and empty and almost definitely full of interesting shit left behind, or at worst lots of fun breakable government nerd bullshit.

He slid out of the car, booted feet clomping far more heavily than Allison’s heels on the pavement as he circled around to the trunk and grabbed his crowbar.

Broad shoulders rolled off stress like waves washing sand smooth on the beach, and teeth glinted white in a feral smile as the trunk slammed.

Time to fuck shit up.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I swear Billy is going to get actual character growth, but this was labeled slow burn for a reason. He's a dick who lashes out when he's angry, and that takes time and effort to grow out of.

## 5. Live Wire, Part 1

### Notes for the Chapter:

So after rewatching the last episode of season 2, I realized that Eleven/Jane was supposed to wait a year before coming out of hiding. Let's just pretend for the sake of this story that that didn't happen, and Hopper was allowed to enroll "Jane Hopper" in the middle school with the other kids for the spring semester.

Also, this chapter was getting rather longer than my usual chapters and taking a while to finish, so I've chopped it in half. Hopefully the second half will go up by about the end of this week.

The kids filled Steve in on the plan during the car ride. It was not, in Steve's opinion, very much of a plan. If Coach Bell had pitched a play this vague during a game, Steve figured there would be about a ninety percent chance of the game going tits up in the first five minutes.

"Let me get this straight," he said, fingers clenching and unclenching on the steering wheel as his face scrunched up, "The *entire* plan is this: you guys crammed as many radios into your backpacks as possible this morning, and you're hoping that plus the "energy", he took one hand off the wheel to do air quotes, "of the lab where El and maybe, you don't even know for sure but maybe, other kids were held, will be enough for her to go into her magic void and find these other kids that may or may not exist."

"El knows they exist."

As much as she wanted to support her new friends, Max couldn't help but empathize with the level of frustrated confusion Steve managed to exude in a single eye roll following Mike's statement. She wasn't entirely convinced either that this wasn't a fool's errand.

Mike still viewed her with suspicion, which Lucas had archly



informed her was awful hypocritical of him, since he had brought in Eleven last year without any concern for how the rest of the Party felt. Still, it made her feel weird, like she was constantly on the edges of the group, which gave her an unexpected kinship with Steve, who had only been filled in on things because Dustin vouched for him and they needed a ride.

Though, at least she knew who El was. She was pretty sure, from the way Steve looked during DnD games, that Steve still hadn't been filled in on exactly who the psychic girl was, and why the Chief of Police had adopted her.

The argument continued between Steve and Mike, till they were nearly at the lab and Eleven finally spoke up. "Back," she said. Steve couldn't meet her eyes while driving, since she, Mike, and Will were all crammed together behind the driver's seat, like one big lump of dark-eyed crazy. Max could see her, though, and it didn't do a thing to help her interpret the other girl's weird way of talking.

"What?" Steve asked.

"Park in back."

"Why?"

"A feeling."

Steve sighed, once again echoing Max's feelings, and drove all the way around the lab to park in the back. As soon as the car was stopped, both back doors burst open, spilling the Party out onto the dirt road that ran behind the lab. Steve popped the trunk, and they grabbed their backpacks full of walkie-talkies - Max, still lacking a walkie-talkie of her own, had stuffed most of the components for Mr. Clarke's borrowed Heathkit ham shack into her backpack. She tugged her jacket closer around her chest and crossed her arms, waiting for the rest of the boys and Eleven to finish gathering their own things.

Only a few stars shone in the sky away from the glow of the moon through high thin clouds, and a breeze stirred her hair around her face. She shivered. The air here was so different from California, colder and wetter and darker all at once. She liked her new friends,

but she missed sunny California heat.

The trek back around to the front of the lab was quieter than the car ride, mostly full of the sound of their shoes on the pavement and the rustling of dead branches of the nearby forest. At the front of the complex, a gate rose dark and forbidding from the gloom, with a tiny little gatehouse in front of it.

Here, Max finally saw her first demonstration of Eleven's abilities. At school El couldn't risk using her powers without someone seeing, and even in Mike's basement playing DnD, she tended to be fairly reserved about doing anything weird. Now, she stepped forward from the Party, Steve and Mike both taking a half step forward after her, and raised one hand towards the locked gate, black leather clad shoulders settling like Billy's before a fight. Her eyes slipped closed, and something dark dripped down her face from her nose - blood. She was bleeding.

*Cool.*

A moment later, the lock disengaged with a faint *snick*, and the gate slid open just enough for six kids and one Steve Harrington to slip through.

It was pretty badass, Max had to admit. "Nice Mage," she whispered to Mike as she moved up next to him. He crossed his arms and didn't answer, but he was smiling, and he couldn't take his eyes off El a few steps ahead.

Max had never been inside the old Hawkins lab before. She saw it from the outside, that day that everything went down, but being inside was a whole new level of creepy.

It was dark, only a few dim emergency lights flickering in corners, leaving long stretches of shadow between pools of blue light. Occasionally, the lights glinted off smears of blood on the walls and floors where bodies, she assumed, were dragged away by government officials (or eaten entirely by those demodog things, but she wants to think about that even less). The rare demodog corpse still littered in the empty corridors, too, along with long claw-sized gouges in the tile, adding an extra air of *really freaking ominous* to the whole place.

When they came across the first corpse she jumped, and Lucas grabbed her hand. She wouldn't admit how much she appreciated the reassurance.

"Where are we going, then?" Steve asked from the front, breaking the silence that had fallen when they entered the lab and causing Max to jump nearly out of her skin again. Lucas squeezed her hand a little too tight to just be offering reassurance, and she smiled at him. A shaky, nervous smile, but at least he smiled back.

"Office," El said, leaving Mike's side to move up next to Steve. "This way."

The walk was silent outside of the occasional directions from Eleven and the buzzing of the overhead lights. The rest of the group trailed after her, sticking close together in the mostly empty hallways. They passed close to a set of open double doors looking into a lab room, and Max shuddered at the broken glass and electronics strewn all over the floor in front of a gaping pit and cracked wall that she was sure had to be the closed gate. The pit yawned like the mouth of hell, and she was grateful they weren't using that room to search for Eleven's family.

Max breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the head scientist's office, though she noticed some of the other kids tensing further, and Lucas's palm was sweaty against hers. Steve flicking the yellow overhead lights on didn't help the atmosphere at all.

Eleven cleared a space in the center of the office with a flick of her head and a blank eyed stare that reminded Max too much of Billy for her comfort. At least the magic was cool.

Lucas tugging on her arm brought her attention back to the present, and she joined the rest of the kids in setting up the radios in the space El had cleared. Not knowing what kind of power she might need to find people she had never met before and didn't even have pictures of, they had brought every radio they had, plus the borrowed Heathkit ham shack when Mr. Clarke wasn't looking. Max found the whole thing a little freaky still, but she had to admit to a certain amount of excitement at the same time. Finally, she was getting a chance to *really* see El's powers in motion.

While they all organized the various radios, Steve stood by the door, his bat clutched in white-knuckled hands. "I am gonna be in such deep shit," he muttered every so often, reminding Max of when they burnt the Mindflyer. As much as Max sympathized with his general lost and confused air, he confused her too. He was the same age as Billy, and he looked at Dustin sometimes like a little brother, but like a real little brother, not like the way Billy always looked at her. It twisted anger inside her sometimes, a tight feeling beneath her ribs that said it wasn't fair that Steve wasn't even Dustin's brother and he still liked Dustin better than her brother liked her. But she was trying to be better than Billy, and Billy's dad. Trying not to let the angry voices win. Besides, it was kind of hard not to like Dustin. He wasn't as cool as Lucas, but he was nice, and funny.

Once everything was set up, they gathered in a circle around the mess of radios like some kind of bizarre campfire, with El furthest from the door and Steve perched on the edge of the desk next to some more scratches like claw marks that Max didn't want to think too hard about. The office wasn't nearly far enough away from that pit that still gaped open like Lucifer's skull just waiting to spit up demons to finish ripping them all to shreds.

Quiet filled the room, aside from the buzzing static of radios and old ceiling lights. Max gripped Lucas's hand again. Mike put one hand on Eleven's shoulder, and they shared an intense, intimate look, before Eleven's eyes disappeared behind the fabric of her blindfold.

It was, all in all, less dramatic than Max expected.

oOo

Water lapped over Eleven's feet in the dark, white light barely encroaching a few feet into the endless black void. Another faint spot of light shone to her left, where Kali sat at a table, leaned back and staring at nothing.

Eleven watched her for a moment, knees locking up. She didn't like the feel of Kali's rage. Didn't like how the power it gave her felt like the power of slimy rotten vines around her heart.

She turned away, and took a step into the dark.

*This place is fucking creepy.*

Billy wandered through blue-lit hallways, dragging his crowbar along the walls and wishing any of the dead monsters were alive so he could hit something. He'd smashed a few windows already, and kicked three separate monster corpses just to double check the level of lifelessness. Nothing happened all three times.

Except for more disgusting slime getting all over his boots. He entertained a brief fantasy of forcing Harrington to lick them clean, but that came too close to thoughts he wasn't fucking thinking about.

He shoved his way through a set of double doors, encountering a stripped down hospital room. There was a bed and some shelves in the corner, but not much else. Billy opened the cabinets, finding nothing but a spare dusty sheet folded in the corner. Nothing to destroy there. One swing of the crowbar took care of the little glass windows in the doors, and then Billy moved on.

The place was certainly right out of a horror film, with the empty hospital room and all the bloodstains on the walls and the slimy flower-faced baby Fellbeast bodies, but he was getting real tired of nothing but corpses and empty rooms to fuck up. Most of the place was emptied out or busted up already. Deep gouges scored the floor in places, marks that matched the clawed limbs of the dead things, and most of the windows Billy hadn't broken were already smashed, thick shards of glass still glittering in dark corners and dim stretches of hallway. A couple rooms that looked like lab rooms were empty but for dust and bolted down benches and more empty cabinets.

Nothing to really sink the teeth of his rage into. Fucking government lab full of weird ass monster shit, and still it managed to be almost as boring as the rest of the town it was in.

He was kinda glad none of it looked like it had already been vandalized by people, at least. Cleared out by the government, sure, but most of the actual destruction matched well enough with the dead things on the floors that Billy could imagine they were all that had happened to the place. Which was good, because if anyone else

in this shithole town had been out vandalizing the only interesting place in at least a fifty mile radius *without* inviting Billy, they were gonna fucking die.

One of the emergency lights flickered and went out above him. Billy didn't jump in fright, but he might have twitched. A little.

He kicked his way through another set of double doors, and pulled up as short as though he'd been slapped by Neil.

Now *here* was some fucked up shit.

At the end of the corridor ahead of him lay another set of doors, this time sagging open on busted hinges, leading into what could only be described as a one of Lovecraft's wet dreams.

The room looked like it had once been the center of the lab, with multiple computer banks running down the length of it, but the shattered glass and jagged metal and wires littering the floor was only the beginning of the mess. Beyond the computer banks was an actual pit in the ground, with a creepy metal elevator resting against the edge. Behind the elevator, the wall looked like Jack had tried to cross his mutant beanstalk with a fungus made of those dog monsters' slime, and slapped it onto the wall of a government lab.

Creepy.

Cool.

He edged through the doors into the room, taking in the destruction. Most of the overhead lights were little more than empty sockets with a few shards of broken glass still stuck on like knives, but the red emergency lights in the corners with their metal caging hadn't been destroyed by whatever took out the rest of the lab; they shone dimly, casting a sickly red glow over everything, making the smears of blood all over the walls and floor blend into everything else.

A monster corpse sprawled at the edge of the pit with a shotgun wound turning its face to mush. Billy edged closer, nudging the ugly thing with his boot. It flopped and slid, tumbling over the edge of the pit and falling down down down for ages before Billy heard the wet

*thud* of a body hitting a floor far away. He grinned, tongue flicking out to wet his lips. There was something rotten in this stupid little town, and it looked like Billy had found the epicenter.

He kicked the elevator, which rattled satisfyingly, and then shuffled closer to the edge, glancing down.

“Fucking hell,” he said, words disappearing quietly into the still air. The pit sank deep into the ground, at least a few stories, and the faint red light barely illuminated anything. As he stared, his eyes adjusted; slowly, the bumpy shine far below resolved itself into a mass of corpses. He was too far up to be certain, but they seemed to all be the same dog monster things.

“Poison chemicals my ass,” he muttered.

That chick who died had probably been ripped to shreds by a flower-petal face full of teeth, instead of poisoned. He bet that was the real reason for there never being a body. Billy shuddered at the thought in spite of himself. No wonder the Wheeler bitch had been so torn up about her friend getting literally torn up that she hooked up with the school freak.

She probably even saw it go down. She’d always seemed a little off to Billy, the few times he can remember noticing her in Harrington’s shadow, and given that ex-boyfriend Harrington clearly knew something about all this bullshit, it would make sense that they’d both been dragged into it together with her friend dying. Hell, maybe she broke up with him for pushing Bella or Betty or whoever in front of one of the creatures to save himself.

He discards that idea as soon as it comes. *King Steve* is far too noble for such a *Billy* move.

Turning away from the pit, Billy took in the banks of government equipment, rows of computers and monitors and switches and dials for doing god only knew what in this shitty little town. He wondered if any of it might be salvageable and sellable, and then he wondered who the fuck would even buy salvaged computer shit in Hawkins.

God, he missed being in a big city.

Probably even King Steve's parents didn't own a computer in this stupid backwards town, where his best friend in California had owned every Apple available, along with a whole mess of other neat shit. Well, owned might not have been quite the right word. Had sticky fingers, an obsession with anything electronic, and a knack for knowing when rich businessmen were out of town without anyone to watch their fancy houses, more like.

He'd gotten Billy to help him tear apart three different IBM PCs, taught him what the mess of metal and wires inside all meant. Jake'd taught Billy a lot of things.

Billy thought, for a moment, how excited Jake would be at the chance to pry apart a government lab and see what made their equipment tick. He swung the crowbar around, jammed it into a side panel, and put his weight against it till the panel came lose and he could throw it over his shoulder in the direction of the pit. Everything inside blurred when he dropped to his knees to look, and he dropped the crowbar to swipe at his eyes.

Fuck.

This night was supposed to be fun, but all he'd found so far was a whole lotta already wrecked and dead bullshit, and now he was digging up memories that were fucking *supposed* to be dead.

He was so lost in the tangle of his head he almost didn't notice the lights around him growing brighter, till the whole place was lit up like the middle of a bonfire. His head came up slowly, and he reached without looking for his crowbar as a wild smile unfurled on his face. This was different.

A blue glow shone through the open doors, and Billy picked himself up in one fluid movement, boots sliding softly on the floor as he crossed the room to duck his head out into the corridor. All the emergency lights dotting down the hall burned like blue flames. In the middle of the hallway parallel to the room he was in, white light like sunshine leaked out of a cracked open door. A low growl filtered through the buzzing of the lights, and Billy's attention was drawn to the very end of the corridor.



One of the corpses was stirring.

Billy ducked his head back, leaning against the sagging door as he adjusted his grip on the crowbar. His lips peeled back from his teeth in a snarling grin. Fucking finally.

He leaned back around the door just in time to see the thing stumble to its feet, claws scrabbling on the tile floor as the legs moved in a way that tilted just sideways from *right*. Its ribs bulged under dark slimy skin and as he watched, the whole face opened up to show rows and rows of razor sharp teeth, and a bloodcurdling shriek echoed down the hall like a physical thing. The sound bounced off the walls, almost seeming to multiply as Billy's vision narrowed and a whoop tore free of his own chest. He bared his own teeth, swung the rest of himself around the doorframe, and felt the red haze of everything he'd been bottling up for *weeks* settle over his eyes, trickling liquid iron down his spine.

From the twisted wrongness of its bones beneath thin skin, the thought drifted through his mind, that *maybe this thing is just as used to pain as he is*. Maybe it wouldn't go down as easy as Harrington did from one blow.

This should be fun.

As one, Billy and the monster took off, charging towards each other down the burning-bright hallway, until –

Until the monster reached the slightly open door just before him, and he registered the sound of screaming – that wasn't just the echo of the creature – from inside at the same time the creature veered in its path, curving sideways in a mind-bending move and barreling through the door.

And some of Billy's beautiful scarlet rage iced into terror as he picked out one voice among the rest, one he'd heard plenty of times, usually directed at him and one single, stupid, unrepeatable time, directed at Neil.

That was Max's voice.

## 6. Live Wire, Part 2

### Notes for the Chapter:

I am so sorry this is so much later than I anticipated! I handed off my computer last week to my campus IT for what was supposed to be a pretty quick fix, and then they found more stuff wrong with it and ended up holding on to it for over a week, along with most of my file backups. Woops. But now, I have my computer back, and here is chapter five part 2 in celebration!

There was no sound besides the huff of her breathing, no light outside her own small halo. Even the water beneath her feet barely rippled as her steps disturbed it. She had been walking for an age, longer than she had ever spent before in the dark place, and the weight of it bore down upon her like being submerged in a deprivation tank, like papa's hand on her shoulder, like the blood that pounded in her veins when she used her abilities.

One foot in front of the other. Just keep going. She had stopped once, let Jim lock her up to keep her safe, and Mike's friend got hurt again, and Kali had been out in the world killing people to make her own hurt go away, just like Eleven, or Jane, or whoever other people told her she was, had done. She had missed so much while she stayed locked away for her own protection, learning new words and new music, and that just because someone loved her and had good intentions didn't mean they couldn't still hurt her.

She loved Jim, too, but she could help people, whether he liked it or not.

She was Eleven, and Kali was Eight, and maybe she didn't know a lot about the world or what certain words meant or how to do math like Lucas or identify lizards like Dustin, but she wasn't stupid either. Papa also wasn't stupid, and he didn't do things for no reason. Eleven and Eight meant there were more, meant at least nine more. If she kept going, maybe she could find them. Maybe if she could find them, they could make sure together that the Upside Down never

ever came back. Maybe they could help her help Kali, even.

If only she had more pictures, or even a memory to guide her, she could find them faster.

Or if she could make herself focus on Papa's lingering aura, still so dark and cloying, dripping from the walls of his office when he had been dead for more than a year and someone else used the room. The threads of Papa's aura could lead her to the other sisters, she was sure of it. That was why she had lead the Party to this room.

The leather of her jacket creaked when she wrapped her arms around herself. It was new. Jim bought it for her, saw how much she liked the look Kali gave her. Said leather was bitchin, too. Bought her eyeliner, after her first shower in days washed off Kali's makeup. Was useless at helping her with that. He never wore any makeup, he told her.

The reason her makeup now didn't look stupid had surprised her. Mike's friend, the one who almost died twice because of her, used to play with his mom's makeup when he was smaller even than he was now. *"Don't tell the others it was me who helped you, please,"* he had whispered, as he showed her how to put the eyeliner on without smudging it everywhere, and how to make her lips as red as blood.

Friends don't lie, it was the first thing Mike taught her, but Will said that not lying didn't have to mean saying everything, either. Sometimes you could not lie and just not talk about it. She wanted to tell Mike, didn't think Mike would care, not with how he never cared about her strangeness, and not with how he looked at Will like he'd face the Upside Down alone if it ever came for Will again and there was no one else to help. But it was Will asking for her silence, Will who never would have been hurt so bad if it weren't for her. The thought of that made her stomach twist, like Papa breathing over her shoulder and the hiss of a frightened cat and knowing the names of the men whose necks she had snapped with barely a flick of her head. She figured maybe she didn't have to like it, but maybe she owed him this.

Jim had not taught her the word *guilt*. That one Papa had taught her.

If she was going to fix her guilt, then she had to think about Papa.

Ahead of her, a new light flickered on in the darkness.

oOo

Steve and a few of the kids jumped when the lights blinked. He swallowed back the fear in his throat, and looked at Eleven. Mike still had his hand on the girl's shoulder, and Will propped up her other side. She was bleeding. He wanted to call a stop to things, had wanted to call a stop to things ever since these idiot kids got in his car and demanded he drive them out to this crazy place to do crazy mysterious things.

But he remembered the little girl's eyes when she said *family*, remembered Nancy calling him bullshit because he never wanted to face anything, just wanted to run away and hide and pretend it was over as soon as the monsters weren't staring him in the face anymore, and he tightened his grip on his bat and bit his tongue till he was almost bleeding too.

For something to do, he walked over the door, cracking it open and looking up and down the corridor. There was nothing, nothing but the doors to the gate down one end and a demodog corpse down the other. He returned to the desk and sat back down, and waited.

oOo

Eleven stopped walking. The light ahead of her was different than usual. Not clear. Streaky, like something was trying to block her sight.

She swallowed. Nothing could hurt her here. As long as she ran, didn't try to talk to it if anything bad from the Upside Down showed up, nothing could hurt her. She would be okay. And if anything did try to follow her out, she knew now that she was strong enough to slam the door in its face.

The water felt thicker as she forced her feet to keep moving forward.

Slowly, the image in front of her grew clearer. There was a woman ahead of her, a woman with gray streaks in her hair, sitting with her

back to Eleven in an old wooden rocking chair. She didn't seem to have noticed Eleven. Eleven wasn't even sure the woman was awake, except for the faint tap-tap-tapping of her fingers on the chair arms. There was still a streaky darkness to the air, different from the fuzzy unreality of the people she usually found here. If she turned her head just right, the darkness reminded her of the ash from the Upside Down.

She could go back. She could leave, try again another night, maybe. She was afraid.

She kept walking.

Tendrils of smoke drifted off the rocking chair, but the woman didn't disappear. By the time Eleven had edged her way halfway around the chair, she was holding her breath. This woman felt *wrong*.

But. She also felt like *sister*.

Now that Eleven was close enough, she could feel a connection between them. This woman *was* from the lab. And she was hurting.

Eleven stepped closer, reached her hand out. It was just shy of touching, when the woman's head whipped around, more smoke rising from her as she seemed to grow larger, looming huge and terrifying over Eleven.

Eleven jerked back hard enough that she fell over, landing sprawled out on her backside in the water that wasn't water.

"Who are you?" the woman asked, almost shouted, voice hoarse and full of a too familiar rage. Eleven gasped from the ground and shrank away. No one ever saw her in here. Even Kali hadn't seen her here.

No one saw her but the demogorgon.

She looked up and met the woman's eyes, and gasped again. There was a white film over both eyes, but they were staring into Eleven like they could see *everything*. Her voice caught in her throat. Shadows loomed large over the woman's back, and the ash filled Upside Down light spread outwards, quenching the light around Eleven. There was something else in the shadows, another frightened

face, but Eleven was too scared to concentrate on anything but the woman. The woman pointed at her, and she noticed three small, circular burn marks right where her own tattoo was, before the woman opened her mouth.

“How did you get here?” the woman shouted again. “GET. OUT!”

The shadows reached for Eleven, and she screamed.

In the distance, a demogorgon roared.

oOo

Eleven tore the bandana from her eyes at the same time an unearthly shriek cut through the air. Steve almost fell off the desk in his haste to stand up and plant himself between the kids and the noise. Maybe the girl had magic powers, but she also looked about three seconds from passing out with the amount of blood streaming from her nose and her ears, too, from what Steve saw before he turned to face the door.

“Shit shit shit shit shit,” he could hear Dustin chanting behind him amid a few other screams from the kids. He didn’t look back, didn’t bother scolding the kid for his language. If any situation warranted all the curses in that kid’s arsenal, it was this one.

*Plant your feet*, said a dark voice in his head, and he adjusted his stance, widening his feet and settling himself like he was stepping up to bat in baseball.

Dustin continued chanting *shit shit shit* behind him as heavy feet pounded on the floor, and Steve would have joined in if his jaw weren’t locked by the terror rising up from his bones and digging its claws into the back of his throat till he choked on it. The lights in the room flared just before the shriek and they were still flared bright as a summer day, blinding him. He couldn’t breathe. The sound of heavy paws drew closer, a drumbeat of doom and Steve was so so fucked, was gonna get all these dumbass kids killed because he couldn’t say no to their stupid wide eyes, and the bat fumbled in sweat-slick, nerveless fingers as a demodog burst in through the door he stupidly left cracked open.

They were all going to die.

The demodog leapt for Steve, flower-petal face opening wide as the kids screamed behind him, and Steve's entire life didn't flash before his eyes but he kinda wished it would, kinda wished he could delay the death streaking towards him in a heavy misshapen body with something poetic, but instead he was gonna die and the only thing that flashed through his mind was a hallucination of Billy fucking Hargrove silhouetted in the door with a mad grin on his face and a crowbar raised in his arms.

"Billy?!" Max shrieked behind him, and Steve had half a second to think, "What?"

And then the hallucination swung his crowbar and the demodog sailed sideways with a pained squeal. A very solid and real Billy Hargrove followed the dog as it slammed into the wall with a wet *thunk* and wailed on it again and again with the crowbar, till no power in the world could get the resulting lump of ruined flesh and blood and shattered bone back up.

Hargrove turned away from the remains of the demodog, something wild still in his eyes, but Steve didn't even care that the last time Hargrove looked like that he woke up feeling like his face had been run over by the entire Hoosiers lineup in full gear. The bat clattered to the ground, and before his brain had fully caught up to his adrenaline-fueled body, he had already thrown his arms around Hargrove. "Jesus fucking - *thanks*," he mumbled into the side of Hargrove's face.

Hargrove froze, stock still in Steve's arms. Even like that, he was... surprisingly nice to hug. Warm, and smelling of cigarettes and the cheap cologne Steve seemed to be developing a weird attraction to.

The thought had barely crossed Steve's mind before he leapt backwards, a blush rising in his cheeks at the directions his thoughts had almost gone.

It was probably just the adrenaline. Fear boners were totally a thing. Hargrove's eyes were wide, and he was staring at Steve.

“Oh my god, Billy, why are you here?” Max shouted from behind him, destroying the moment.

Walls slipped down over Hargrove’s eyes, and he bared his teeth in another feral grin, looking past Steve like he’d turned invisible. “I could ask you the same thing, *Maxine*. Don’t remember giving you permission to have a sleepover with Sinclair and the pedo gang in fucking Arkham Asylum.”

Steve bristled.

“I told you to stay away from my friends!” Max was still shouting.

“Maybe you and your friends shouldn’t be engaging in some kinda demon summoning!”

“There wasn’t supposed to be any demodogs,” Steve spoke up. From behind him, Dustin piped up in shrill support.

“Well clearly that didn’t fuckin’ work out, did it, Harrington?” Hargrove said, finally looking back at Steve.

“She was supposed to have closed the gate!” Steve said, pointing at Eleven and realizing too late that Hargrove (probably) had even less clue what was going on than Steve. Thank fuck. For once Steve wasn’t the most confused person in the room.

“Hey!” Mike yelled, adding his voice to the chaos, “don’t blame this on El! She didn’t know what would happen!”

“None of us knew this would happen!” Dustin and Lucas shouted at the same time.

“Does *anyone* know what the fuck happened, then?” Billy said with a sarcastic laugh. “This ain’t the first time I’ve found you holed up somewhere weird as shit with a bunch of kids and dead monsters, Harrington.”

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose. “Look, maybe we should get out of here before we continue this yelling match? In case any more of the demodogs wake up?”



"Sure," Hargrove said, crossing his arms. "But Max is coming with me." He pointed the crowbar at her when she made a noise of protest. "You're in enough trouble as it is!" He swung the crowbar towards Steve, "And you're going to explain everything, Harrington, or so help me I will finish what I started on your pretty face."

"And then Max will finish your ugly face!" Dustin shouted. Steve loved that kid, he did, but he was also probably going to kill him one of these days.

"Alright, alright," Steve said, holding out his hands in what he desperately hoped was a placating manner. "I'll tell you what happened. Meet me at, um, the quarry? Tomorrow. And I'll tell you everything I know. But right now we need to get out of here and get the kids home."

"What!" Dustin shouted. "Steve! You can't do that!"

"I can and I will!" Steve said, rounding on the kids. "And the rest of you little shithheads are going to go to Mike's house *where you're supposed to be*, and there is going to be *no more Upside Down* tonight, you hear me?"

"Don't yell at El!" Mike shouted right back, and Steve counted very slowly to ten. He was not going to strangle Nancy's little brother. At least Will and Eleven were being quiet, though that was probably because both of them looked about ready to fall over from exhaustion. Will might already have. Poor kid. He was probably sleeping even worse than Steve most nights after the shit he'd been put through.

Steve would feel a lot worse for him if it didn't currently mean one less kid to argue with.

Christ. A few months ago he hadn't even wanted to tell Barb's parents that their own daughter was dead, had just wanted to forget everything and move and pretend he was going to marry Nancy and live a nice normal life where monsters were nothing more than a brief blip on the radar of his life.

Now he was the go-to babysitter for a bunch of kids who loved

*seeking out* the monsters, and he was planning to spend his Saturday morning bringing the school bully into the loop. If only he could just put all the kids to sleep. He'd happily carry them all the way to his car for a bit of peace.

He finished counting to ten. "We are going home. Move out, or get left behind." Not that he'd ever do that, but at least it finally got the kids moving, grumbling the whole way into the thankfully demodog-free corridor.

oOo

Billy missed Harrington's hug as soon as he stepped away. Beating the shit out of the baby Fellbeast drained some of the anger sparking through his veins, but he still had no idea what the fuck was happening, and why Steve Harrington was once again in a strange place in the middle of the night surrounded by kids and monsters.

Also, there were two more kids. How did Harrington keep collecting so many kids?

At least the little curly haired girl being supported by who he was like eighty-five percent sure was Wheeler Jr. had kinda cool taste, with her leather jacket and eyeliner. The other new kid blinked up at Billy on his stumbling way out, and Billy preened a little. That was a look he knew well, remembered having that look at thirteen when hot guys passed him on the beach. Poor kid had shit coming his way in life if he didn't learn how to hide it better, though.

Billy grabbed Max's arm as she made to follow the brat pack. "Yeah I'm not letting you out of my sight again, you little brat," he said, sneering down at her. She glared back like the little bitch she was, and then Steve put a hand on Billy's shoulder.

He had really nice hands.

"Look man," Steve said, in that stupid voice he used when he was trying to get Billy back down, that made Billy itch to punch him in the face. "Let's get out of here before we start any more fights, please?"

A little edge of desperation leaked into Steve's voice on the last word, and Billy swallowed down the competing rage and frustration and frustratingly rage-inducing lust that Steve's words and the hand on his shoulder sent coursing through Billy.

"Sure," he said. "Getting out of here sounds like a real great idea." He wrenched away from Steve's hand and dragged a protesting Max into the corridor, ignoring her yappy little friends as well. After a few fruitless tugs at her arm, Max gave up and stomped along at his side all the way out the lab.

As they passed through the gate and Billy's car came into view, Max yanked away again, surprising Billy enough to escape. "I'm going with my friends." Her feet were planted, and a hard look on her face twisted up her face. It was almost impressive how much she could look like Neil when Billy was the one actually related to his old man.

"You are not," he snarled, but she refused to back down.

"Mom and Neil aren't even around tonight! They won't be back till tomorrow."

"Jesus Christ, fine!" Billy said, a headache building behind his eyes.

He couldn't believe what a fucking pussy he was, that this little girl had beat him twice now. At least he was still less of one than pretty boy Steve. "Harrington," he called, voice low with deadly promise, "if she's not home by nine tomorrow morning, your ass is grass."

Steve nodded in understanding, and Billy stomped to his Camaro. He didn't even know where fucking King Steve parked, and he didn't care. The tires squealed as he gunned the engine and peeled away from this miserable disaster of a night.

oOo

When Steve dropped Max off the next morning, Billy was hiding in his room, smoking. He'd woken up hard with the memory of Steve's arms around him lingering in his sleep-clouded mind, and he'd jerked off before he could remind himself what a bad idea it was to think too much about Steve Harrington's pretty face and girly hair, imaging

that the warmth of his blankets was the warmth of Steve over him instead.

He heard the car drive up, heard the front door open. A few minutes later the car drove away.

He was surprised when Max showed up at his door, the sound of Harrington's beemer fading in the distance. She wouldn't meet his eyes, gaze glued to her feet scuffing at the floor. "Thanks for saving our lives, I guess," she said, leaning one shoulder against his doorframe in a move that failed to look anything other than deliberate.

Billy snorted smoke into his lungs. By the time he was done coughing, Max was actually looking at him, the ghost of a smile on her face. Her eyes darted away as soon as she saw him looking, and the smile hardened into a frown. A feeling a bit like shame stabbed into Billy's gut at the sight. The sleep and the jerking off and the cigarette had softened him up a bit, he figured.

"Yeah, kid," he said, voice still a bit hoarse. "Of course." She turned away, and Billy's mouth opened without his brain's permission, blurting, "Look, I'm sorry I've been a dick, okay. But I don't want you dead."

There was surprise in the set of Max's face when she looked back at him. It hurt, how much surprise there was, when all he said was that he didn't want her dead.

"You're still a mouthbreather," she finally said, and he smiled at her and the new insult she'd come up with around the cigarette in his mouth.

"Alright. I deserved that."

She scampered off to her own room after informing him that Steve was expecting to meet him in twenty minutes, and Billy fell back against his bed, muffling a groan into his pillow.

At least this probably couldn't go as badly as the last time he'd hung out with Steve at the quarry. He wanted to know what the fuck was

going on with the monster shit and wanted in on anything that involved Maxine fucking off all over town again, and Steve was gonna bring him in on that. No stupid fucking feelings about Harrington necessary.

He went through two more cigarettes laying on his bed, before Max banged on his door and yelled that he had to leave or else Steve wasn't gonna tell him anything.

"Alright, Jesus," he shouted back, picking himself up. He thought, briefly, about styling his hair and putting on more cologne before he left, but that thought was quickly banished.

He still threw on his tightest jeans, paired with his nicest shirt with most of the buttons undone, but that was in case anyone else saw him on his way out. Not for Harrington.

## 7. This Will Be Our Year

Wet sheets tangled around Steve's legs as he woke sweaty and gasping while leaping demodogs faded from his vision. For several long moments, he sat in bed and breathed, not moving, waiting for his heartrate to go back down. He had a lot of nightmares these days.

Nancy used to wake up shouting Barb's name sometimes, or shaking and reaching for a weapon that wasn't there. He wondered, on days when the memories brought him especially low, if Nancy would take him back if she knew that he had nightmares of his own now. Other times, he just felt bad for how he used to never know what to do when she would wake up gasping and crying. For the way he'd tried to shove everything that happened way down deep where he could pretend it was over and done with and didn't matter anymore, all the while completely ignoring how the girl he fancied himself in love with was falling apart inside. Everything had happened so fast *for him*, over and done with before he could really grasp what was going on, and he'd thought things could just go back to normal afterwards.

It really had been bullshit.

The most bullshit part was that he kept trying to convince her not to tell Barb's parents about how their own daughter got killed by the government, and now he was about to tell Billy Hargrove of all people everything. All his rationalizations about how this was *different*, because Billy already saw the demodogs and was probably going to involve himself in the Hawkins monster shit storm no matter what he was or wasn't told, fell flat in the memory of Barb's parents' faces, as they talked about selling their house to find the daughter he and Nancy already knew was dead.

He really was a fucking coward. No wonder Nancy left him. She deserved someone who was willing to have her back, who wasn't afraid to do the right thing.

The urge to throw the blankets back over his head and hide away in bed for the rest of the day was almost overpowering. He didn't owe Billy anything. Didn't owe Billy anything except his life, that was, after last night. Probably the rest of the kids lives too.

Fuck.

A forty minute hot shower took some of the edge off the lingering panic and unease. The mirror was fogged up with steam and his skin wrinkled more than his eighty-year-old gran's by the time he turned off the water, but at least his fingers weren't shaking anymore. He grabbed his hairspray from under the sink and paused. The only person who was going to see him today was Billy Hargrove, and given how things had gone the last time they were alone together, it was probably better for Steve not to head out looking like he'd put effort into his appearance.

He stood for a few minutes, staring at the reflection of his face in the space he'd wiped clear on the mirror. Dark circles lingered under his eyes, and without the hairspray, his hair lay flatter than usual, sticking up in the back with a few strands falling in his face even after he'd combed it back.

He looked a mess. It was fitting - he felt a mess.

By the time he pulled on clothes, forgoing his usual tight jeans for a pair of sweats he'd had since freshman year, he was late. If he was too late, he wondered if Billy would give up on waiting and leave. The thought gave him some comfort as he double checked all the locks before leaving, taking the scenic route that wound through the forest rather than the main road to the quarry.

Billy's Camaro was already there when Steve arrived, Billy leaned up against the driver side door with a cigarette in his scowling mouth. Steve parked and then sat in his car, fingers fidgeting with the sleeves of his sweater and wondering if he should have done his hair up after all, till Billy rolled his eyes and walked over to rap his knuckled against the window.

"You gonna sit there all day, pretty boy, or are we gonna talk?" Billy asked around the cigarette when Steve rolled his window down. His brows were pulled down in a frown, but his fingers were tapping on the roof of the Beemer in a way that read to Steve as *nervous*.

"We're going to talk," Steve said, running a hand through his hair one more time. When Billy didn't move, he sighed. "You have to let me

out of my car first, asshole."

Billy stepped back just enough for Steve to open the door and step out into freezing air. He stuffed his hands into his coat pockets, wondering not for the first time how Billy managed not to freeze to death in nothing heavier than his leather jacket, with his chest exposed like always. It wasn't his business if Billy wanted to die of hypothermia for the sake of fashion, but he couldn't help but be annoyed by the sight. He glanced up at the gray sky, looked at Billy shivering slightly against the winter breeze, and made a decision.

"Nevermind," he said, getting back into the car and sticking the key in the ignition so he could crank up the heat. "We can talk in the car. Get in."

Billy stared at him long enough that he wondered if the asshole was going to refuse, before finally tossing his cigarette butt on the ground, stamping it out, and circling the car to slide into the passenger side. A wave of cologne and smoke followed him into the car, and Steve breathed in through clenched teeth, ignoring the warm flush that crept up his chest at the smell he'd come to associate with Billy without even realizing. The last time they'd been in a car together, Billy had kissed him. It had been a while since anyone kissed him besides Billy, which was the only explanation for the way his skin tingled at the other boy's proximity.

"Come on, Harrington, out with it," Billy finally said, when the silence stretched too long.

"Look," Steve said, halting. "I don't actually know that much myself, okay."

"Seriously?" Billy slumped, limbs sprawled all over Steve's passenger seat, and gave Steve an unimpressed look.

Steve avoided his eyes as the story spilled out in bits and pieces in the warm air between them. "I wasn't even supposed to be involved with stuff last year, and this year I would have been fine minding my own business except that Dustin wanted me to help him find Dart, and I couldn't just say no to the kid!"



“The fuck is Dart?”

“It was his lizard. Well, not lizard. He thought it was a new species or something I guess, but it was actually a baby one of those demodog things.”

“Jesus, and that kid was what, keeping it as a pet?”

“... I think so?”

“Great, this story is already filling me with so much confidence.”

“Are you going to shut up so I can talk, or are you just here to be an asshole?”

“Jesus Christ, Harrington, don't get your panties in a knot.”

Steve almost kicked him out of the car. Instead, he took a deep breath, counting to ten like his mom sometimes did when his dad was yelling about some inconsequential thing that was wrong with the world today.

“Okay,” he said, settling back against his seat and picking at a loose thread in his sweater with one hand. “Do you want the story or not?” Billy rolled his eyes and slumped even further into the seat, which Steve supposed was asshole for yes. “Okay. Last year, the lab - the one that shut down because of “chemical leaks”?”

Billy nodded at him. Steve remembered him asking about the lab last semester, pinning Steve to the floor in the showers after basketball practice with his hot, piercing gaze, and blatantly disbelieving Steve's fumbling lies about the place. Maybe if he'd just explained then, Billy wouldn't have shown up last night.

And then they all would have died.

“Well, it wasn't chemical leaks. It was... shit, I don't know. An alternate dimension, I guess. The kids call it the Upside Down. Like, you know, an upside down version of our own world where everything is built on darkness and death and shit. I think they got most of their names from Dungeons and Dragons.”

Billy snorted at that.

"So anyway," Steve said after he'd gotten his shivering skin back under control, unable to meet Billy's eyes, "there was this monster last year that got out of the Upside Down, and it. It kidnapped Will Byers, and. It killed Nancy's best friend."

"That chick who died from the "chemical leaks"?"

Steve glared. "It wasn't chemical leaks. It was the demogorgon." Immediately, he felt bad. What right did he have getting annoyed at Billy not taking this seriously? He had never taken Barb's death seriously either, and she had died in *his* pool, while he was getting laid with her best friend.

"Right," Billy said, "so this thing killed her. Why didn't it kill the kid, too?"

That gave Steve pause. "Um," he said, eloquently. "I think Will was hiding from it? Like, this thing could break through to our world through the walls and shit, but the places where the worlds met didn't always have the monster? So like, he could hide before it saw him? At least, last year, when we were in the tunnels, they were just under Hawkins all the time but the demodogs weren't always there."

Billy stared at him. "What tunnels?"

"Right. So, last fall, when you, you know, beat my face in for trying to stop you from beating up a kid?" Billy's teeth clenched and he looked away. "Well, there were these tunnels under Hawkins that connected our world to the other world, and the kids wanted to go set the thing on fire, because there was a creature in the other world that was controlling all the other monsters. I was trying to keep them safe and stop them, until you showed up like a fucking maniac and beat me unconscious, so that I couldn't stop the kids from driving out there and risking their dumbass lives. At least it worked, or so we thought, and the gate got closed. Last night was the first time anyone saw a live demodog since then, as far as I know."

Silence filled the car for another few minutes. Steve almost wondered if Billy was going to apologize, properly this time, for last fall. He

was disappointed when Billy finally spoke.

"If I hadn't seen those, what, demodogs? for myself, I wouldn't believe you right now."

"Trust me, I know how crazy it sounds. I don't even know the whole story, myself."

"Yeah, you've mentioned. I feel like I know even less than I did yesterday, and that's saying something since yesterday I didn't know jack shit except you were keeping secrets from me and messing around with my sister."

He pulled another cigarette from his pocket, and Steve forgot his jab in favor of whipping around to glare. "You can't smoke in my car!"

Billy rolled his eyes, cracked open the window, slid the cigarette between smirking lips, and lit it, all without breaking eye contact with Steve. This asshole didn't even need his fists. He was going to kill Steve just from how insufferable he was.

"Alright," Billy said, plucking the fag from his lips to blow smoke at Steve. "If those hellbeasts are coming back to life, what are we going to do about it?"

Steve stared at him.

"What?"

"There is no we!" Steve flung his hands in the air. "You are not a part of this! Now you know what's going on, so you can stay away from the monsters and not go playing around in places where you might die!"

The scowl was back on Billy's face. "I'm touched by your concern, Harrington," he said, looking anything but. "Thing you're forgetting, though, is that my kid step-sister is involved in this. If she's gonna be out risking her stupid fucking ass with the rest of your merry band of misfits, then I'm damn well gonna be a part of this too. My dad'll fucking kill me anyway if she dies."

The argument, Steve was forced to concede, was a solid one. He

poked his finger into Billy's chest, ignoring the way Billy's eyes widened at the contact. "Fine," he said through gritted teeth. "Fine! But if you want to be involved in this, you can't be a dick to the kids. They're good kids. Apologize to Lucas and to your sister, and maybe everyone else will let you in. If there's even anything to *be* let in on besides a crazy fluke."

"Which one is Lucas?" Billy asked, and Steve felt his eyes roll. If his mom could see him, she'd probably warn him about his eyes rolling right out of his head.

"The one you shoved into a bookshelf and threatened to murder?"

"The Sinclair kid?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

Steve's mom was going to be right if he rolled his eyes any harder. "I don't know, maybe for being a racist asshole and slamming him into a wall?"

Billy looked away and flicked his cigarette out the window. He fidgeted before he spoke, teeth grinding like the words were being dragged out of him. "Look, Harrington, I don't give a shit who my brat of a step-sister hangs out with." Steve raised his eyebrow at Billy. "Sure, it's annoying that she fit herself into this place in like five seconds, like she's actually happy here or some shit, but whatever, that's not my problem."

"If you don't care who she hangs out with, then why'd you target Lucas? There were two other kids there too who you totally ignored, in case you don't remember."

"Because it's been over a year and she should know better."

"Know better than what? To hang out with a black kid? Hate to break it to you, Billy, but that's racist."

"No, okay." Billy hunched against the seat, curling in on himself and looking like he'd rather be anywhere else. "Fuck. She should know

better than to piss off my dad, alright? If he finds out about Sinclair, he'll do a hell of a lot worse than me. I just wanted to scare the kid into staying away from her. My dad'll do more than *scare* him, trust me."

"Oh." Billy still wouldn't meet his eyes. "That's still not cool, man."

"What would *you* know?"

Steve didn't know what to say to that. He was still trying to process the implications in Billy's little speech, when he was saved from replying by the crunch of gravel beneath the tires of Jonathan's car pulling up next to his.

"It's Jonathan," he said stupidly, getting a snort of laughter from Billy.

"No shit, dumbass," he said, uncurling just a little bit.

Jonathan looked frantic when he banged a fist on Steve's window, and Steve rushed to roll it down, nearly getting a fist to the face before Jonathan pulled back. "Wow, dude, what the hell?" Steve said. Just because he'd accepted that Nancy didn't want him didn't mean he was thrilled to have Jonathan Byers pounding on his car in the early morning like a crazy person.

"You have to come to my house," Jonathan said. Steve's eyebrows went up.

"Okay," he said, drawing out the word. "What the fuck?"

A scowl planted itself on Jonathan's face, and Steve thought that was totally unfair. Jonathan wasn't the one getting shouted at by the guy who stole his girlfriend, after all.

"It's Will," Jonathan said, eyes cutting briefly past Steve to Billy.

"Oh," Steve said, anger leaving as quickly as it had come. That poor kid had already been through so much. Also, now that he'd started looking out for Dustin, Steve thought he could understand a little better how Jonathan must feel every time Will got hurt. "What's wrong with him?"

Voice lowering, clearly to block Billy out of the conversation, Jonathan explained that Will hadn't woken up that morning. He'd gone to pick up Will from the Wheeler's where the kids had been finishing up their "sleepover," and the other kids had just thought Will was extra tired until they tried to wake him up to go home. Jonathan's voice lowered even more till Steve could barely hear him, and he leaned closer to Steve to add, "We had, um, Eleven, *look* for him. She couldn't see anything. It was like there was something blocking him, she said."

"Fuck," Steve muttered. He was *so fucked*. The chances that Will's Sleeping Beauty act had nothing to do with the little adventure the kids had dragged Steve on were, Steve figured, pretty damn low. Even if he was failing statistics, these odds were pretty obvious, and not in Steve's favor.

"So," he said, while Jonathan stared at him, "I'm guessing you're here to get me because the kids told you about last night?"

A sharp nod and another scowl answered that question.

"I don't think I really have anything to offer that the kids can't tell you," he said, and Jonathan glared past him at Billy again before whispering back at Steve.

"Look," he spat, "I agree with you on that, but Will won't wake up and my mom is freaking out, and it'd be really helpful if you could at least stop by and tell her anything you noticed last night, and then you can leave and go back to being *normal*, like you should have done yesterday before you took my brother back to that *place*."

Steve recoiled from the venom in Jonathan's words, and felt shame snake up through his belly to his throat, choking him.

"We'll be there," Billy said, leaning around him and bracing one hand on Steve's thigh. His skin burned at the point of contact, and his cheeks heated when Jonathan's eyes skated from the touch to Billy's face.

"You weren't invited, Hargrove," he bit out.

"Billy was there too last night," Steve interrupted before a fight could break out, hearing the words as though they were coming from someone else. "He was separate from us for most of it, so maybe he saw something no one else did. He might be able to help."

It wouldn't be the first time someone got dragged in to this shit that no one else wanted around, Steve thought with a scowl of his own. After a few tense seconds, Jonathan shrugged.

"Fine," he bit out. "But if he's a dick to anyone, he's gone. Hopper will be there, and I'm sure he'd have no trouble throwing you out on your ass." He directed the last comment at Billy, who only raised one eyebrow and licked his bottom lip, his top lip peeling back to show off his teeth.

"Sure," he said, slow and easy in a deep, rumbling voice right next to Steve's ear. "And if any of you get Maxine hurt, I'll kill all of you and your precious police chief."

"Okay!" Steve shouted, jerking away from Billy and slamming his shoulder against the door. "Let's all just go and how about no one gets into any fights or hurts anyone, yeah?"

For a minute, he thought Billy and Jonathan were going to get into a fight anyway, with him in the middle, and fuck he really didn't need to get his face pounded in *again* by the two guys who already had a history of fucking it up, but finally Jonathan sighed and slumped.

"We'll do our best to keep Max safe," he said. "Just, please *try* not to be a dick?" Without waiting for a reply, he turned and got back into his car.

The sound of ignition starting up as he prepared to drive himself and Billy Hargrove to the Byers' house felt like another nail in the coffin of *normal* that Steve had spent a year trying so hard to reach. Normal looked more and more like a dream on the horizon of his life, a mirage that he could run towards forever without ever getting any closer.

And Billy Hargrove still hadn't taken his hand off Steve's knee.

## Notes for the Chapter:

A bit of a dialogue heavy filler chapter and I'm still not sure I'm entirely happy with it, but at least we're getting closer and closer to serious plot things, and now Billy is looped in. Somewhat. Steve probably wasn't the best person to try to give him the story, lol.

Comments are always super welcome! And if you want to come yell at me about Harringrove ever, I'm trashmouse on tumblr and always enjoy people yelling at me about my favorite ships.



## 8. Bad Reputation

"So, you said the gate got closed," Billy said, breaking the silence halfway to Jonathan's place. He'd finally taken his hand off Steve's leg to light yet another cigarette, feeling jittery and strange over the possessive desire still sparking through his blood. Steve's nose wrinkled at the smell of smoke.

"Man," he said, glancing over, "you know I'm never going to get that smell out of my seats. My dad is going to kill me."

Billy heard the exaggeration in his tone, and wished he could be so nonchalant at the thought of getting killed by his dad. If his dad ever found out about him hanging out with Harrington, or worse, found out that he tried to kiss Harrington, death wouldn't be teenage hyperbole. He'd be six feet under by the time his dad finished with him.

"The gate, Harrington?" he said, shaking off thoughts of his dad before the prickling feeling beneath his skin could bloom fully into anger and get him kicked out of the car.

"Yeah," Steve said. "It was closed. That's what we thought."

"How'd it get closed?"

"Oh. Well, ah, Eleven, she's one of the kids, and she has magic powers. She used them to close the gate."

Billy snorted. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I know, right? But, um, she was experimented on by the lab, I guess, which is how she got the name Eleven, like experiment Eleven, and got magic powers out of it? I don't really know. But she killed the first demogorgon, and then she closed the gate, which is how we didn't all die in November. Now she lives with the police chief cause her dad was like, the head researcher conducting experiments on her, so now the chief's her dad." Steve shrugged, an awkward movement with his hands on the steering wheel.

A shudder went through Billy at Steve's words. Christ, and he thought

his dad was bad. At least the asshole wasn't conducting freaky government experiments on him. Just regular old run of the mill beatings whenever Billy got too far out of line.

Though. He had to admit, the thought of having super powers was kinda cool.

Harrington shrank in on himself when they got to the Byers place, and Billy didn't blame him. First off, the place was terrifying, a creepy old beat up house in the woods that, last time Billy had been there, had been covered in a bunch of crayon drawings like some kind of mental ward. Secondly, Harrington looked disastrous. *He clearly wasn't trying to impress you*, whispered a voice in Billy's head that he ignored.

It was true, though. He wasn't entirely sure Harrington had even showered before showing up to the quarry, and he certainly hadn't bothered putting on real clothes. His normally fluffy hair was limp and sad looking. Now that they were about to go spend some quality time with his weirdo friends, he seemed to be regretting his choices.

Inside the house, the police chief was yelling at all of Harrington's kid friends that they should stay out of this.

The little chick with the leather jacket, Eleven, was scowling up a storm while the curly haired kid waved his arms around and shouted. Billy couldn't help the shiver that ran down his spine at crossing the familiar threshold, behind Byers, and all the yelling wasn't helping. Harrington hung back slightly behind Billy, which didn't help him at all. As soon as he was through the door, all eyes zeroed in on him.

"Steve!" the little curly haired one said, running over to Steve. "Will won't wake up!"

Steve smiled and ran a hand through his limp hair. "I know," he said.

Billy did his best to fade into the wallpaper as the police chief questioned Steve. It only took a few minutes to realize that Steve didn't know shit that the kids didn't already know more about. The whole time Steve talked, Byers glared at him, which Billy thought was a little rich. So Steve took the kids to the creepy lab. Whatever.

They clearly were bratty little shits with zero self-preservation instincts, and would have found a way over there on their own if they had to.

Billy ignored the fact that he had also been pissed at Steve for taking Max along. He refused to be on the same page as Jonathan Byers.

The chief sighed as Steve reached the end of his very short recounting of events. "You didn't notice *anything* else?" he asked one more time. Steve shook his head, scuffing the toes of his sneakers against the floor. The chief sighed again.

"Alright. What about you, Hargrove?" he said, turning on Billy suddenly enough that Billy was taken by surprise.

He jolted off the wall he was leaning on, glaring. He toned down the glare as much as he could when his brain caught up with his actions, reminding himself that the guy was a cop who could easily make Billy's life hell.

"I noticed a giant hole in the ground in the middle of the lab, a bunch of dead monsters, and one monster that came back to life right after the lights started going crazy," he said.

All the little kids glared at him. "Why the fuck were you even there?!" the curly haired one shouted. Billy ignored him.

"Language, Henderson," the cop said, before zeroing back in on Billy. "That's a good question. Why were you there?"

Billy considered ignoring him too, but decided against it. He glanced once at Steve, and looked away immediately on seeing Steve's eyes on him. "I was having a bad few weeks," he said, grinning at the cop with all his teeth. "Figured I'd go take out my anger in a healthy way on shit that no one cared about."

"You knew about the monsters that came from the lab." It was not a question. Billy lets his grin drop and glared.

"Sure," he said. "I knew there was some fucked up stuff over there and figured maybe I'd get to kill a monster. But they were all dead when I got there."

The cop sighed again. "Alright then. That means we're nowhere closer to figuring out what's wrong with Will."

"Does that mean he can leave now?" Sinclair asked, arms folded as he stared at Billy from next to Max. Billy knew better than to glare back when he was outnumbered this much.

"All of you are free to go home in the company of an adult," the cop said, glaring at the kids who immediately started protesting.

"They're welcome to stay here tonight if they want."

Billy's head whipped around. Mrs. Byers was standing in the hallway, looking at everyone.

"Max already had one sleepover this week," he said. "She ain't staying here tonight."

She immediately started protesting.

"You got somewhere I can talk to my sister in private?" he asked Mrs. Byers, and the rest of the kids started protesting too. Mrs. Byers just nodded, motioning them into a room down the hall. As soon as the door was closed, he rounded on Max.

"You're not staying here tonight," he snarled. "Aside from how much my dad will kill me if I let you stay out two nights in a row, I don't trust you not to go running off on some new stupid dangerous adventure."

Max crossed her arms and glared back at him. "You're not in charge of me," she said.

Billy barely restrained himself from shaking her. "According to dad I *am*," he shot back.

"The only reason you care about me at all is because of *Neill*!" she shouted. He pinched the bridge of his nose, blowing his anger out on a harsh breath.

"I do care about you not getting eaten by a fucking monster, too, you know."

"No you don't!" She stared at him, eyes going flinty and narrow. "If you don't let me help my friends, I still have access to that bat and maybe next time I won't miss."

There was a roaring sound in Billy's ears at the memory of that night, and his heart thumped heavily in his chest, blood dragging like liquid fire through his veins.

"You threatening to hit me now if I don't do what you want?" he asked, feeling on the edge of hysterical. "And here I thought you hadn't learned anything from my dad! Turns out you've learned how to be just like him!"

Her eyes went wide with shock, and Billy's chest felt like it was caving in. He wanted to break something, to take back control over *something* in his life, but the pathetic truth was that he was afraid of his little thirteen-year-old step-sister. Afraid of her, afraid of his dad, afraid of Harrington using that stupid failed kiss against him. He was so goddamn tired of being afraid.

He laughed, too wild and too jagged, and looked away from her stupid wide cow eyes. A second later, he froze. Steve Harrington was standing in the doorway, a pathetic look of surprise on his face. Billy let out a wordless snarl. Great. This day had started out so promising, and now everything was headed right to shit.

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but Billy beat him to the punch.

"Piss off, Harrington. This conversation doesn't concern you." It wasn't a big deal, what Harrington overheard. Hell, most of the people he hung out with back in Cali got smacked around by their dads sometimes. It *wasn't* a big deal.

"I was just... looking for the bathroom," Harrington said lamely, unable to meet Billy's eyes.

"What?" Billy snapped, when Steve kept staring over his shoulder instead of leaving. Steve startled, gave Billy another sad look that Billy bared his teeth at, and finally scampered off.

When he rounded back on Max, she'd managed to get her own face in order. "Isn't that one kid magic or some shit?" Billy asked, unwilling to keep on with the argument they'd just been having. "Can't she figure out what's happened to mini-Byers?"

Max scowled at the nickname. "She *tried*," Max said, like that or any of this insanity should be obvious. "But something was blocking her, and Chief Hopper doesn't want her to try again. He says it's too dangerous."

"If it's too dangerous for her, then that's all the more reason for you to be at home away from this shit."

"Right," she said, rolling her eyes. "Where *you* can protect me?"

The disbelief in her voice rankled. "From what Steve told me, it's always targeted Byers," he said, trying to be logical. "If you're away from them, you'll be safer."

She scowled. "They're my friends, Billy! I'm not going to abandon them just because it's dangerous!"

Billy wanted to shout back so badly, but he also didn't want to bring the rest of the house running to her defense, so he kept his voice low. "You're an idiot, Maxine," he snarled. "If you don't grow some common fucking sense, you're going to get yourself killed."

"At least I won't be a *coward*!"

The impact of Billy's fist against the wall was loud in the ensuing silence. Max's eyes were wide, fixed on the dented plaster, and Billy's teeth clenched with barely contained rage.

"Say goodbye to your friends, Maxine. We're going home."

Max stared at the wall for a few more seconds, before her face twisted up. "Fine," she spat, stomping past him. "And if they all die, it's *your* fault!"

He lingered in the room for a few minutes after she left, trying and failing to calm his breathing. Everyone but the police chief studiously avoided looking at him when he finally followed her back into the

living room. Even Steve wasn't looking at him, instead sitting with his nerd friends and *Nancy goddamn Wheeler* on the couch. Hopper stood with Max by the door, talking quietly to her. As soon as Billy appeared, Hopper looked up, meeting his eyes. His blood felt at once too hot and too cold in his veins, prickling uncomfortably beneath his skin.

"Why don't you come outside and have a smoke with me while your sister gathers her things, Hargrove," the cop said, the tone of his voice making it clear it wasn't a request.

"Sure," Billy said, forcibly shoving down the anger and flashing a smile at him. Inwardly, he sent a dozen dark promises Max's way if she'd mouthed off about anything that wasn't her business to talk about.

He followed the chief out the front door onto the porch, accepting a cigarette with a quirk of one eyebrow. "You sure an upstanding officer such as yourself should be handing out cigarettes to minors?" he asked, after lighting it up and taking a long drag. The chief rolled his eyes.

"Kid, I may be an old man now, but I still remember being seventeen," he said, not even looking at Billy. The "kid" rankled, but Billy only leaned his elbows against the railing and grinned sharp, looking sideways at the cop.

"So," Billy drawled after a tense minute of silence. "What did you want to talk to me about, officer?"

The cop blew smoke across the yard in a long exhale and finally turned to Billy. "I know Harrington has mentioned my daughter, Jane, to you."

"Yeah," Billy said, gaze darting back towards the door.

The cop's eyes hardened. "I don't think I need to tell you how important it is to keep what he told you a secret. But just in case you're not as bright as your sister says you are, I'll spell it out for you." He tossed the butt of his cigarette on the ground, crushing it beneath his boot. "If she gets hurt and I find out you're to blame, no

one will ever find the pieces of your body. Are we clear?"

Billy shrank in on himself, shoulders going up around his ears. He wanted badly to hit something, but he crushed the feeling down. This was a fucking cop. A cop who had all the resources to carry out his threat and the confidence to make it right to Billy's face. He was dumb (and seriously, "as smart as Max said he was"?), but he wasn't dumb enough to piss off a cop on purpose.

"Yes sir," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Good," the cop said, clapping a heavy hand on Billy's shoulder. "That sister of yours seems like a good kid. You hurt her, and you'll have more than just me to answer to."

Billy smiled, though it felt more like a grimace on his face. "Yes sir," he said again, shrinking away from the cop's touch. The cop stared at him for a moment longer, dark eyes narrowed under bushy eyebrows, and then finally, thankfully, moved away.

"I'll send her out to you," the cop said. He went back inside, and Billy's shoulders finally relaxed. He felt like he did after conversations with his dad, pent up and buzzing in his skin, but there was nothing to do about it. He needed to get Max home, and then he'd have to deal with his dad and probably family dinner, and it would be hours at least before he could sneak out. He pulled another cigarette out of his own pack, lighting it up with shaking fingers.

It was going to be yet another long fucking night, but at least he wouldn't get yelled at for not having Max tonight.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks so much to all the people who have been reading and commenting on this! Your comments give me life, and I love every single one of you <3



## 9. Wiplash

### Notes for the Chapter:

Vague spoilers for those worried about triggers:

This chapter includes some pretty intense scenes of Neil hurting Billy and calling him homophobic slurs at the beginning. If anyone feels like skimming the first quarter of the chapter or so, I won't be offended at all. If you do read and you have any triggers related to domestic violence or homophobia, please tread carefully. It's followed by Billy going into a very self-hating spiral, so some people may want to tread carefully through the entirety of Billy's PoV, which is the first half of the chapter.

A familiar car was back in the driveway when Billy arrived home with Max. Billy gripped the steering wheel, glancing over at her. The little brat was slumped in the passenger seat, not paying attention to anything. For the first time all day, Billy wondered how she had gotten to the Byers' house in the first place. He'd left her at home after all. All he could do was hope whoever had picked her up had done it before his dad got home. He knew better than to trust to hope and luck. Cold dread settled low in Billy's gut as he pulled up to the house and turned off the car.

Sure enough, Susan and his dad were waiting for them in the living room.

"Where were you today?" his dad asked, glaring at Billy. Susan refused to look at either of them as she ushered Max out of the room. Out of sight, out of mind, after all. The air in the room felt thin and hard to breath as Billy was left alone with his dad, the walls closer than they were a moment ago in spite of the room being emptier.

"I was out," he said, not wanting to contradict anything his dad might already know.

"Did you know that your sister was out all night?"

Billy stopped breathing. "Was she?" he forced out, eyes darting to his dad's fists.

Neil stepped closer to him, and Billy knew better than to back away. There was nowhere to back away to, anyway, the closed door behind him and the empty street beyond that. "The police chief stopped by around noon, shortly after I got home to find Max alone and you missing, and informed me that your thirteen-year-old sister, the thirteen-year-old sister you were supposed to be watching, was a witness to an accident last night and needed to go in to give a statement. Now you finally show your face, with Maxine in your car, and I can't help but wonder what you were getting up to last night instead of being a responsible son."

Billy's throat closed up, but even if he could breathe he wouldn't know what to say. That little fucking bitch hadn't even mentioned that Neil was waiting at home for them, expecting her to be returned by Hopper. He was so fucked.

Still, he tried to say something. "I had a date," he said, the words sounding thin and desperate to his own ears. "I thought she was home safe, I'm sorry!"

The first backhand always caught him by surprise no matter how much he thought he should be expecting it by now. His head snapped to the side and his teeth clicked shut as his dad crowded him up against the closed door with a hand around his throat, blunt fingers digging in to soft flesh.

"You and your dates," his dad growled in his face. "Tell me, Billy, were you rolling over like a bitch in heat for some faggot during this *date*?"

Billy thought of Steve and winced, heart hammering in his chest. "No," he bit out, fear tangling around his lungs. "No, it was with some bitch from school, Allison, she's a fucking slut so I lost track of time." A small place in his chest that knew she didn't deserve to be thrown under the bus like that, especially after he'd already treated her so shitty on their date, twisted into a hard knot against his ribs. Most of him was too busy trying not to get hurt any more by his dad to feel bad about the lie, even though he knew more pain was

inevitable.

His dad's face twisted up in disgust, and Billy felt so fucking small in the face of that look.

"You never learn, do you?" his dad pressed tighter against this throat, forcing his head back. "All I ask is that you treat Susan with respect and show a little responsibility towards your sister, but even when I take you away from LA and those boys you were panting after like a worthless cocksucker, you still can't manage to clean up your act. What am I supposed to do with you, Billy?"

Anger itched beneath Billy's skin, warring with the fear and shame. Everything in his life was falling apart, and as usual there was nothing he could do about it. Control wasn't an option for stupid faggots like him. He was just grateful Susan and Max weren't witness to his humiliation this time.

"Answer me," his dad snarled, pulling his hand off Billy's throat and backhanding him again. "*What am I going to do with you, Billy?*"

Humiliation curdled low in his belly, rage and shame competing to claw their way up his throat. He pressed his lips together and turned away, eyes burning as he forced himself to say, "I don't know."

"I don't know either," his dad answered, face still twisted up in disgust. He backed up to stare down his nose at Billy, making Billy feel all of three years old, and held his hand out. "Give me your keys."

Billy balked. "What," he said, "but dad!"

"Did I ask for backtalk?" his dad snarled. "Give. Me. Your. Keys."

"Fine," Billy shouted, feeling his voice break halfway through the word. He fished the keys to the Camaro out of his pocket and threw them at his dad, who caught them out of the air. His dad caught his arm, too, as he tried to storm past to his room, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise as he swung Billy back to face him.

"You can have those keys back when you've proved that you can handle the responsibility of a car." He stared at Billy, who looked

away like a bitch. "Dinner is at five."

As soon as his dad let go, he fled to his room. There were tears dripping down his face, and he scrubbed angrily at them, wishing he had something to throw or someone to fight. It was so much easier to deal with his emotions with his fists. Alone, it was like all the bottled-up rage he could never direct at his old man spilled out to fill his room, thick in the air and pressing down on him till he was about to vibrate right out of his skin or implode.

Restless energy buzzed through his veins, clogging up his arteries with shame and anger and fear, and he couldn't calm down. All the ways he was failing to maintain any control in his life kept swirling through his head, taunting him in his dad's voice about how much of a weak little fuck up he was always going to be. If he had been paying attention to Max last November, she never would have gotten herself involved with monster hunting. He would have never lost control and beat Harrington half to death, and then wouldn't have had reason to fuck up an apology and try to kiss him while high. He wouldn't have gone out to that creepy abandoned lab and gotten himself in the middle of monster hunting, and maybe Harrington would have stayed nothing more than a shameful jerkoff fantasy for nights when he just couldn't help himself. Max wouldn't have been picked up by the Chief of Police while Billy was out with Harrington wishing it was a fucking date, with no clue that his dad was already home.

He wished he could blame everything on Max, but the truth was that it was all his fault. All the *respect and responsibility* his dad kept trying to knock into his head hadn't stopped him from ignoring Max when he was supposed to be watching her, instead letting her go off and nearly get herself killed. It hadn't stopped him from fucking around with a bunch of slutty *girls* till he couldn't stand the sight of their soft bodies or the sickly sweet smell of their perfume because he only wanted to be fucking around with Steve fucking Harrington. Hadn't stopped him from fucking around with guys back in Cali till he got caught and dragged to the middle of fucking nowhere where he still couldn't stop wanting boys because he was every bit the fag his dad said he was.

His whole life was fucked up, and it was his fault. Even so, he might

have still gotten away with more of it if it weren't for Max and her big fucking mouth and tendency to stick her nose where it wasn't wanted.

Dinner was a silent affair. Susan tried a few times to engage Max in conversation about how school was going, but she was being her usual sulky bitch self. Neil chided her once, but of course he wasn't going to raise his fists to Susan's precious little girl, so she got away with ignoring both of them. No one wanted to talk to Billy. It wasn't great, chewing on Susan's shitty pot roast in silence, but it could have been worse. Not having his dad's attention was almost always preferable to the alternative.

After dinner he retreated to his room again. He smoked a few cigarettes out his window and tried to drown out the spiraling thoughts by turning up his music till he could feel it right down to his bones, still shivering with the memory of Neil's hands on his skin and Neil's words in his ears, but his hands wouldn't stop shaking and he couldn't get the miserable snarl off his face. He felt like his body was slowly being crushed under the weight of everything he hated about himself.

He wondered what his dad would have said if he knew about the time he kissed Harrington. Probably would have finally just beat Billy all the way to death. Moved him six feet under this time. Maybe he should have told his dad about it, and finally been done with all this bullshit.

Night fell slowly, stars popping up in the clear sky like far-off Christmas lights. The chill breeze that whispered through his open window felt refreshing on his overheated skin. In a moment of impulse, he scrambled through the small frame. His feet dropped silently to the grass outside, and he glanced longingly at the locked Camaro before setting off down the street, shoulders hunched up by his ears and skin prickling in the breeze, colder now that he was outside wrapped up in it.

He was still too amped up to go anywhere there might be people around, not wanting to lose control again like he had with Steve at the Byers, the memory of his knuckles splitting against Steve's slack face enough reminder why he shouldn't lose control again, so he

walked aimlessly, giving only cursory attention to the road as houses gave way to thick midwestern trees. The dead branches tangling together on either side of the road were so different from the palm trees and evergreens he'd grown up with.

The breeze ruffled his favorite shirt, and he shivered, wrapping his arms around himself. Fucking Indiana. The brat pack called the road he was on Mirkwood. Tonight, trees still dead from winter while the messy flood of fear and anger beating through his veins still threatened to drown him, it seemed an especially accurate name. There were even monsters in these woods, or there had been. Monsters that could rip an unwary traveler to pieces. Billy couldn't decide, looking at the trees as he walked by, whether he was the unwitting victim or one of the monsters.

Car headlights swung around a bend, illuminating the road and throwing the dead trees into stark relief. Billy cursed. All he wanted was to be alone. Or to fight someone, but he had a feeling that wouldn't go well. Alone was safer. He stepped further off the road, hoping the car would simply pass him by. Of course his luck couldn't be that good.

As the car drew nearer and his eyes adjusted to the glare of the headlights, he recognized a familiar Beemer. Steve Harrington drew up alongside him, rolling down the driver side window because of course he would want to chat.

oOo

Steve was having trouble sleeping. It was bad enough that monsters were becoming a fixture of his life, when all he'd wanted after the first monster incident was to claw back some semblance of a normal life. Lately though, something (or someone) else had started invading his life, and he wasn't entirely sure that he could call this one a monster. He had certainly wanted to classify Billy Hargrove as a monster after getting his face beat in the night a little magic girl was off saving the world. Lately, though, Billy had become too confusing to be so easily classified.

After dropping off Billy and Max back at the Camaro by the quarry, he had ignored Dustin's offer, shouted as he was leaving the Byers, to

come back and hang out with the rest of the kids. Fond as he may have grown of the little nerds, sometimes their constant noise just made his head hurt. Instead, he went home, made himself food, and fell asleep on the couch in the living room watching Star Trek reruns that Dustin would have probably liked, but had Steve completely lost three seconds in.

He fell asleep with afternoon sunlight streaming through the big glass windows, and woke up in the pitch black of night. The windows had turned black and reflective with the night, and Steve could admit that he panicked. Even turning on every lamp his mother owned didn't made him feel more comfortable in his home, with all its empty rooms and the lights from the pool where Barb died flickering against the trees that could be hiding anyone or anything beyond those dark windows.

An attempt to lose himself again in more television failed; eventually the quiet emptiness of the house drove him outside to his car. He climbed in the Beemer, turned the radio down to a low hum, and went out driving, aimless and slow, waiting for his heart to calm.

Unfortunately, he was not the only one who was feeling restless. He rounded a bend in the road down between Dustin's place and the Byers, and a figure appeared, haloed in his headlights. He recognized the figure immediately.

Billy Hargrove had on the same thin, revealing clothes he'd been wearing all day, but his demeanor couldn't have been more different from his usual larger than life blustering. He was already stepping off the road as Steve approached, shoulders hunched in and head down to make himself smaller. Steve had no idea why Billy was awake and wandering Hawkins' great outdoors, but he felt an uncomfortable tug in his gut at the sight of his once-bully turned maybe-friend walking in the dark in clothes that weren't nearly thick enough for the cold.

So instead of doing the intelligent thing and driving right on past Billy, leaving him to his own mysterious wanderings, Steve pulled up next to him and had the window half down before he'd even finished his thoughts.

"Are you okay?" he asked, for lack of any better ideas. The guy was

wandering around alone without even a jacket, instead of roaring over the roads in his Camaro, after all.

Billy ignored him. Asshole.

God, Steve had no idea what he was doing. Looking to get his face pounded into the pavement again, apparently, when he didn't take Billy's clear avoidance for the "fuck off" it was. They were definitely not friends enough for this, but, "Hey man," he tried again, "it's fucking freezing outside. You may be an asshole and you are definitely less involved in this whole monster shit than I am, though honestly I barely know anything ever, but what I'm trying to say is we may not be friends but I'd rather not leave you to freeze to death."

God. Steve was *sure* he used to be cool.

Billy stopped walking, and Steve stopped the car, waiting for a response. A heavy weight settled on his chest, that same unexplainable feeling that seemed to crop up a lot around Billy Hargrove. Steve thought back, briefly, to a kiss in a dark parking lot flavored with smoke and desperation, and asked himself for about the millionth time what the fuck he was doing with his life.

Bare, tan elbows planted themselves on the windowsill, and Steve found himself dragged out of his musings by their subject.

"Aww," Billy cooed through the open window, "you're worried about me? And here I didn't think you cared." The smile on his face was anything but happy, even as shadowed as it was by night. The expression widened, eyes and mouth sharp as a demogorgon's claws. "What's got a pretty boy like you out roaming the streets on a night like this, anyway? I would have thought you'd be spending the night playing with your favorite little kids."

Steve should have known trying to talk to Billy was a terrible idea.

"Look," he tried again, because the skin of Billy's arms was pebbled with goose bumps and his fingers were white-knuckled where he had them clasped beneath his chin, and even when Steve had been an asshole who hurt and used people there had always been a part of him that wanted to take care of people too. "Just get in the car, and



I'll take you to wherever it was you were in too big a hurry to get to remember to put on a jacket first." Reading Billy was an exercise in futility at the best of times. In the dark with nothing but Steve's dashboard lights to cut through the shadows on his face, Steve may as well have been trying to read Greek. Even so, he thought he might have been getting through to the dick.

Billy's tongue darted out to run across his lips, teeth gleaming white in the moonlight. "And if I refuse King Steve's *famous* hospitality?" he asked, voice a low purr that did uncomfortable things to Steve's insides.

"I'll drive away?" Steve replied with a shrug. There weren't many other options that didn't involve manhandling Billy into his car and Billy knew it. No reason to pretend. *See, Nancy*, he thought a little viciously, *I'm not always bullshit*.

Billy actually laughed at his statement. "Sometimes you're not so bad, King Steve," he said. His elbows disappeared from the window as he stood up, planting his hands against his lower back to stretch. Steve's gaze very much did not get caught on Billy's abs pushed tight against his shirt as he stretched his back, and it *very, very much* did not stray any lower, either. His gaze snapped up when Billy spoke again, voice back to his normal irritating register. "Alright, you win." He walked around the front of the car, briefly illuminated by the headlights, and Steve bit his lips on a gasp.

In the few seconds it took Billy to pass through the light, the purple bruises on his neck leapt into sharp relief.

By the time Billy slid into the passenger seat, all easy, sprawling grace, Steve had regained control of his face. The discussion he'd overheard earlier at the Byers' was still playing through his head, but he clamped down on the connection his mind kept trying to make between that conversation and the bruises. It was none of his business, and if there was one thing he was damn sure of, it was that Billy would agree.

"Okay," Steve said, at a bit of loss of what to do now. Given the thoughts he was very much not thinking, he doubted Billy would respond well to being dropped off at his house. The end of January in

Hawkins, however, did not exactly tend to sport a lot of options for other places he could drop Billy off, even on a Saturday evening. He knew he was going to regret his next words so much. "Want to go to my place?"

Billy's head tilted towards him, gaze hot and searching as his tongue licked over his bottom lip again. Steve wished he would stop doing that. "Sure, pretty boy," he said. "I'd love to see casa Harrington."

What happened next was one hundred percent Billy's fault, Steve would later swear. The guy was way too fucking distracting. Steve had just slid his car into gear, feeling a strange surge in his chest as Billy's gaze slid down to his fingers wrapped around the gear shaft, had just hit the gas to start driving and take them both *back to his house*. He was watching the way Billy's mouth turned down and his eyes hardened as he looked away from Steve instead of watching the road, and Billy's shouted warning was the only reason he didn't run right over Mike Wheeler and El rounding the corner on a bike, Mike pedaling like they had demogorgons on their heels. He slammed on the breaks, head whipping around in horror as he and Billy both lurched forward at the sudden stop, heart rabbiting in his chest even as he took in the lack of splattered kid all over the road.

Mike had swerved at the last moment too, spilling himself and his pseudo-girlfriend onto the dirt shoulder, and Steve took a few seconds to catch his breath before he wrenched off his seatbelt and slammed his way out of the car.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Billy slip out of the passenger side, one hand steadying himself on the roof of the car. Most of his attention, however, was focused on the dipshits who'd nearly turned him into a murder. A murderer of *children*.

"What the fuck?" he shouted, throwing his arms out in a gesture universally understood to mean, *What the fuck?*

Mike tried to spin him some bullshit about El and visions, and he was not having it. Not tonight.

"I don't *care* what El saw, you shouldn't be out here!" Steve shouted. Mike's teeth clicked shut, and he glared at Steve like he wasn't the

one riding around town at night with the police chief's daughter when they still didn't know if more demodogs were going to pop up.

"This doesn't concern you!" Mike shouted back at him, puffing up like an angry cat.

"The fuck is going on now?" Billy growled from next to Steve, cutting them both off.

"I don't fucking know," Steve said at the same time Mike spat out, "It's none of your business!"

Steve rolled his head back and sighed at the stars. Why did he always get dragged into supernatural things when he was just trying to do normal, non-supernatural things? "Okay," he tried, "Maybe we should all just calm down and get in the car, and you two can explain what's going on while we take you back to Mrs. Byers and the chief."

Of fucking course his perfectly sensible suggestion was ignored.

"Jim cannot know yet," El said, her eyes all big and deep, reflecting back the stars like she held a whole separate universe inside her tiny body. She was a great kid, Steve was sure, but that didn't stop the shiver that went through him when she focused the full force of her attention on him.

"Um, why not?" The chief of police knowing about any new supernatural shit sounded like a *great* idea to Steve.

"He thinks I will get hurt," she said. That sounded like a perfectly reasonable excuse to tell the chief, to Steve, but clearly El had other ideas. "If it hurts me, it would hurt him. I am stronger than he is."

"Yeah," Steve said, slowly, "but he's older than you and he's basically your dad, now, right? So he's supposed to protect you." His logic did not appear to convince her. What was more, Mike appeared to be gearing up for another one of his little shitfits, arms crossed in front of himself and a truly epic glower on his face.

Next to him, Billy said possibly the worst thing he could have come up with in that moment. "If you don't want your dad to know what you're up to, you can take me an' Steve with you instead. I won't tell

anyone what you're up to, and I'll make sure Steve keeps his trap shut too." The asshole was grinning when Steve glared over at him. Mike's glare had also turned on Billy, but El worried Steve much more. She tilted her head to the side, looking into Billy and probably reading his soul or something crazy like that, and then fucking smiled.

"Okay," she said.

Steve didn't think it should be as easy for middle schooler's to bully him as they did, but at least with El he could tell himself that she had the power to literally turn him inside out if he didn't let her climb into the back of his car, dragging a very unhappy Mike Wheeler along with her, and then stare forward fully expecting Steve to drive her to wherever the hell she wanted to go now.

Good thing for his internal organs then that he made the smart choice to let her do exactly that.

She directed Steve across town with curt syllables. They passed the high school, passed the main drag, passed the run down auto shop on the edge of town, and were nearly past the string of cheap, dirty motels that marked the last stretch of Hawkins before the road turned into a two-lane highway to the rest of Indiana when she said, "There."

"Uh, where?" Steve asked, not wanting to take his eyes off the road a second time and risk running over more wayward preteens.

"She's pointing at the Sleep Easy," Billy said next to him, a grin in his voice. Steve was so going to get murdered by *at least* three different parents if they found out he'd taken two thirteen year olds to this place. *Literally inside out*, he reminded himself, and turned into the run down parking lot.

"What now?" he asked. Instead of answering, El and Mike were already unbuckling their seat belts and getting out of the car. "Woah, slow the fuck down shitheads," Steve said, scrambling to follow after them.

"There," El said again, pointing at one of the doors on the ground floor and continuing her single-minded trek forward.

"Yeah, no," Steve said, reaching out to catch her shoulder. She turned her head and raised one unimpressed eyebrow at him, and he snatched his hand back. Still. "We are *not* just going to go up and knock on some random door at what is probably the sketchiest place in Hawkins that *didn't* breed murderous flesh-eating monsters."

He had so much more to say, so many *very good arguments* as to why they should turn around and leave and let Hopper handle whatever had drawn El here, but his mouth clicked shut, trapping them all behind his teeth, as the door El had pointed at creaked open.

Jesus Christ they were going to die. He should have grabbed the bat from his bedroom before he left his house tonight.

A tall, dark-haired woman appeared in the doorway, glancing over their ragtag group with a raised brow and wry smile before her eyes landed, distressingly, on El.

"You must be Jane," she said. "Kali said we'd probably find you here."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I wasn't the happiest with this chapter, but that's been the case for the last few chapters. Going back through, I realized I've not been the best at narrative consistency or consistency in writing quality. I might, when the story is all the way finished, go back and do a proper overhaul of things to bring up the overarching quality of the story, but if I try to do that before I'm done I'll never get to the end. So sorry you have to deal with some chapters being of poorer quality than the rest and the occasional hopefully minimal plot pot-hole. I'll try to do my best, but I also want to get to the end before a million or so years have passed.

### **Author's Note:**

So Billy hasn't immediately joined everyone in demon hunting, but don't worry! He's not getting out of the weirdness that is Hawkins, Indiana, so easily.